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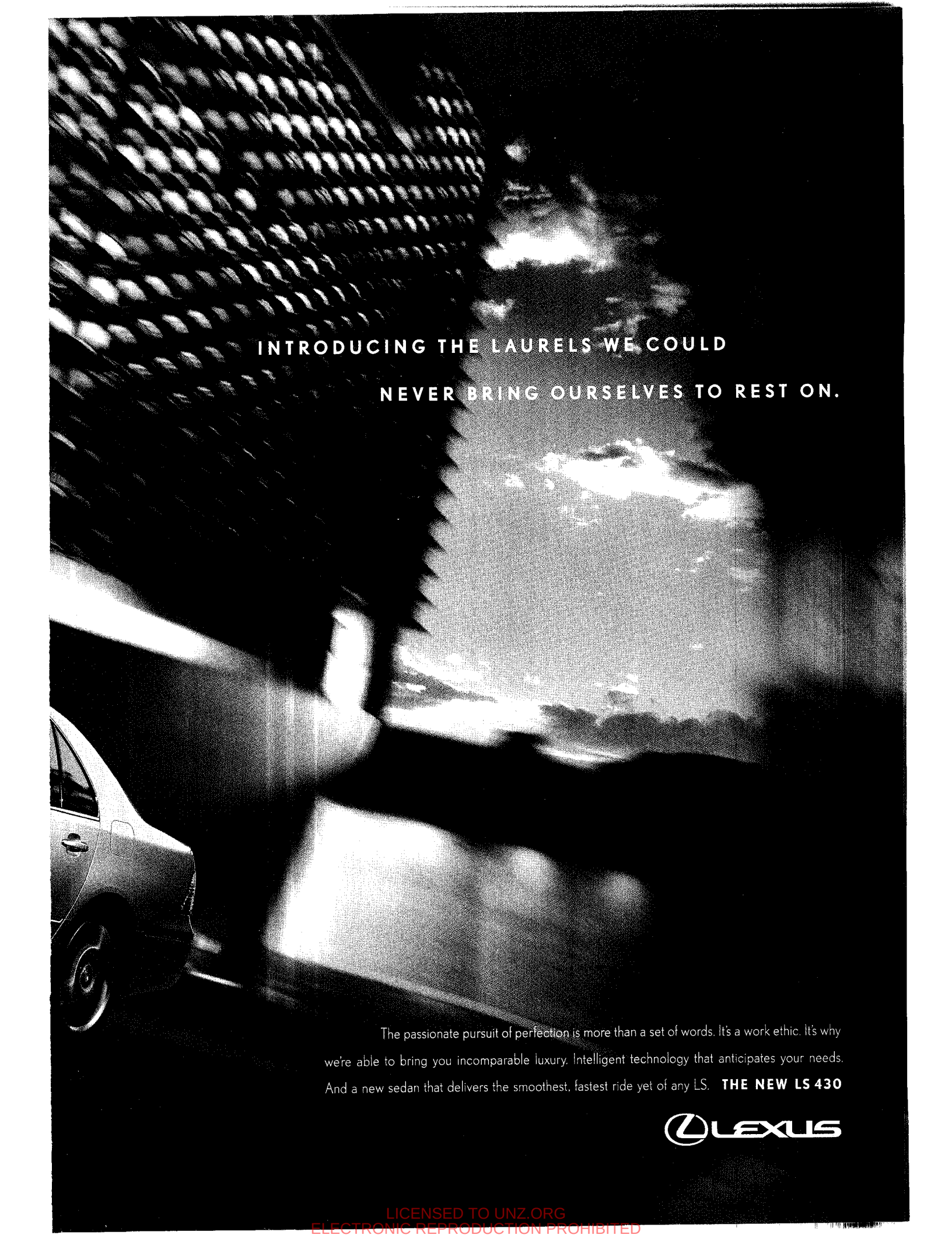
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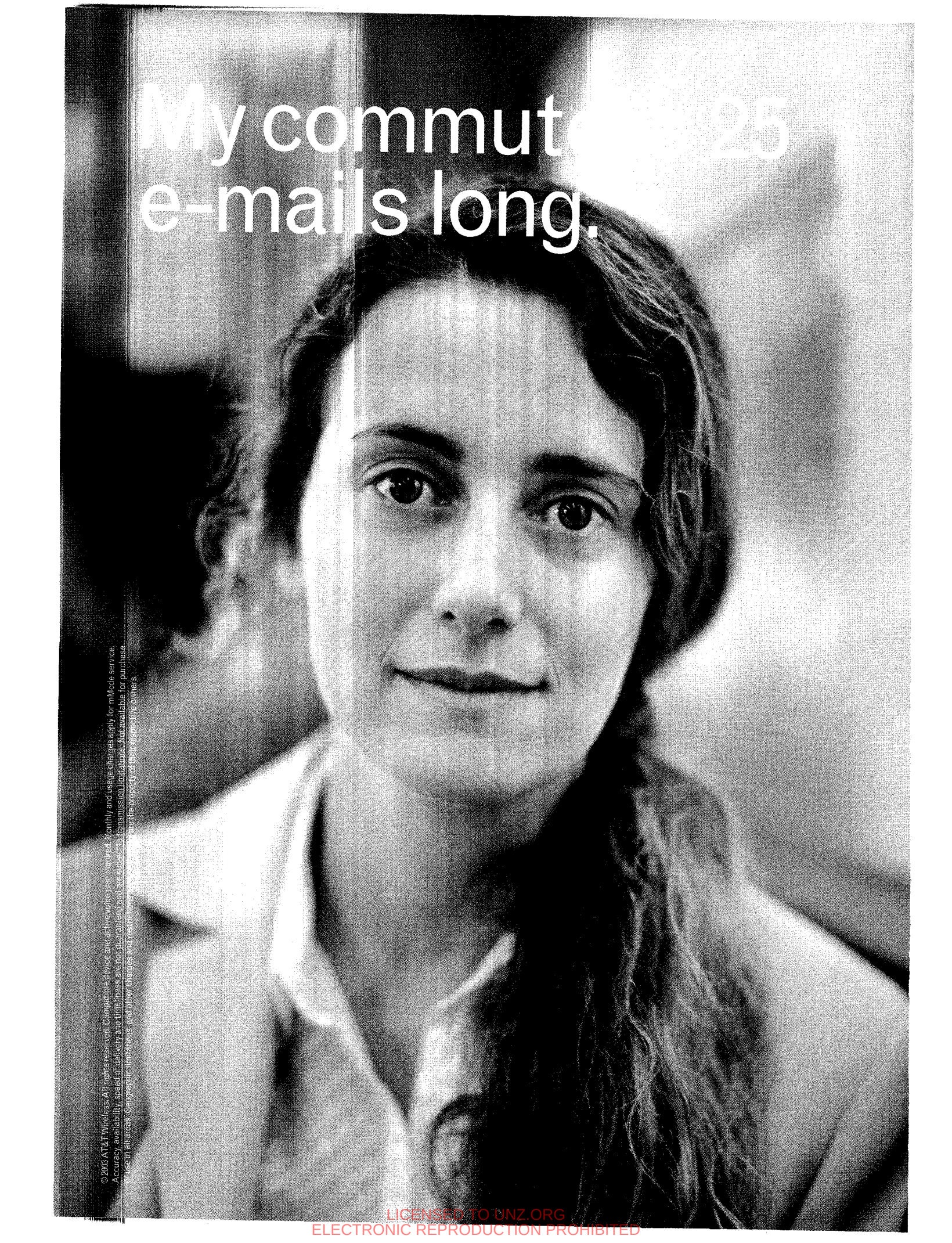


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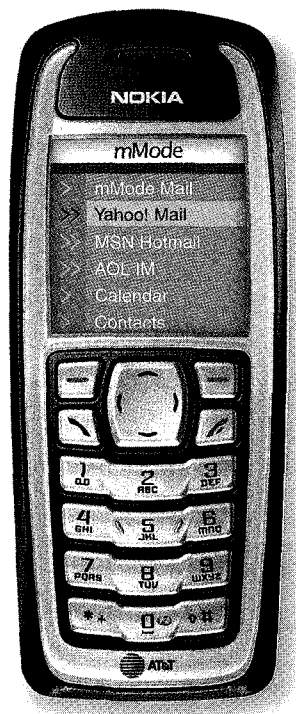
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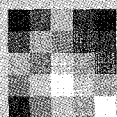
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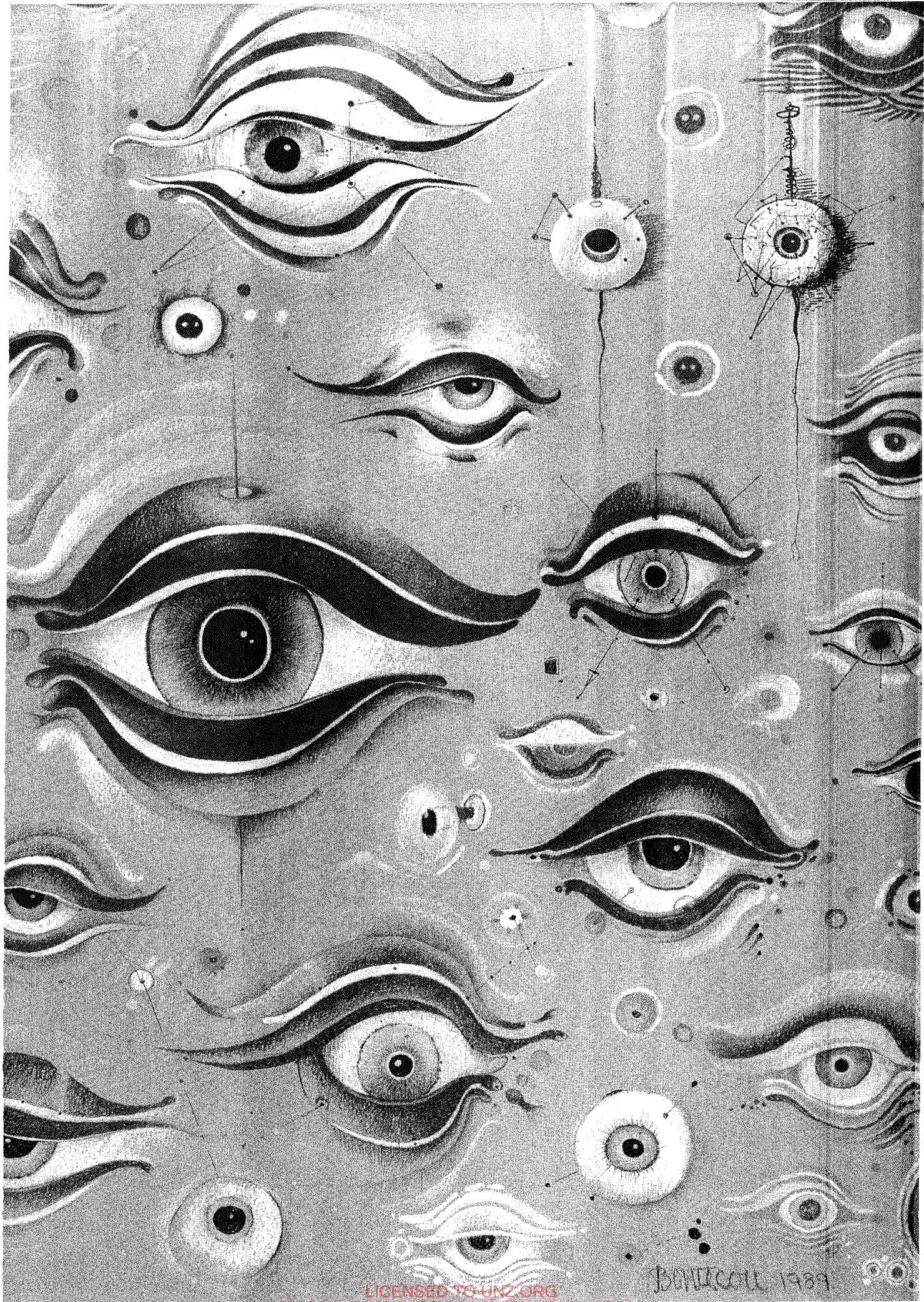
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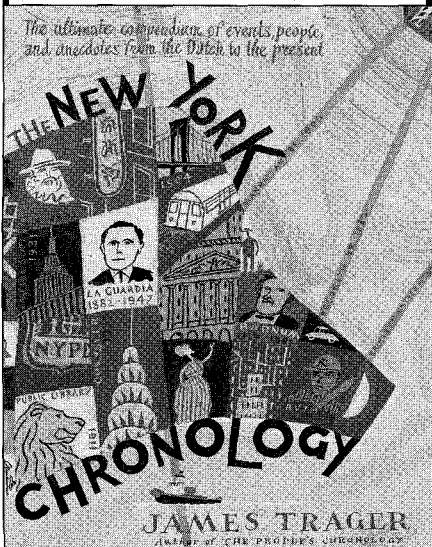
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CONTRIBUTORS

Edward P. Jones ("All Aunt Hagar's Children," p. 128) has written a novel, "The Known World," and "Lost in the City," a collection of stories.

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Lorrie Moore ("Debarking," p. 104) is the author of two novels and three collections of short stories, including "Birds of America" and "Like Life."

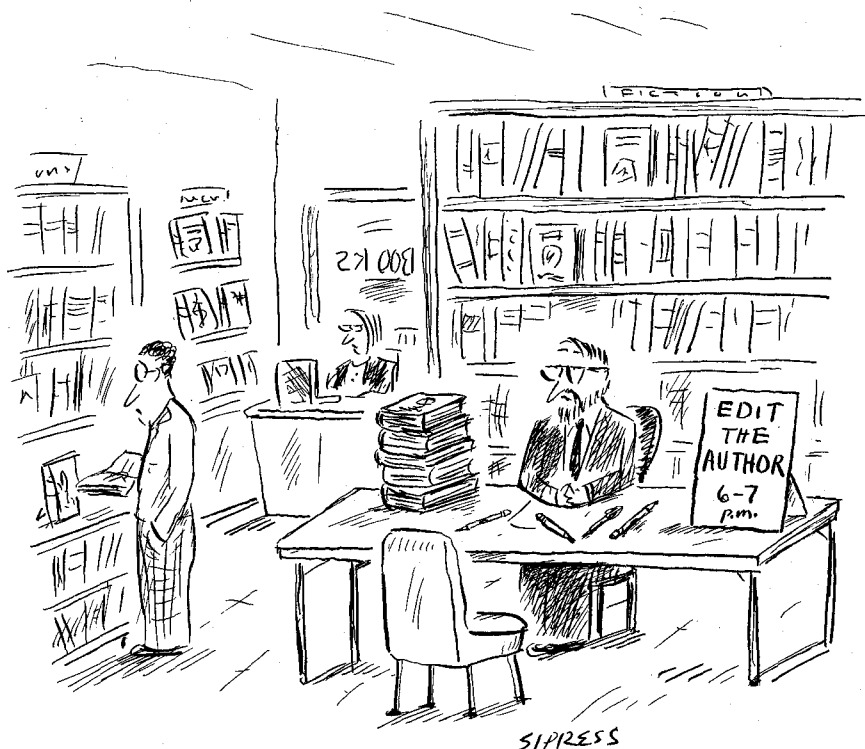
Mary Robison ("The Weather in the Streets," p. 125) received the 2001 Los Angeles *Times* Book Prize for fiction for her novel "Why Did I Ever." Her most recent book is "Tell Me: 30 Stories."

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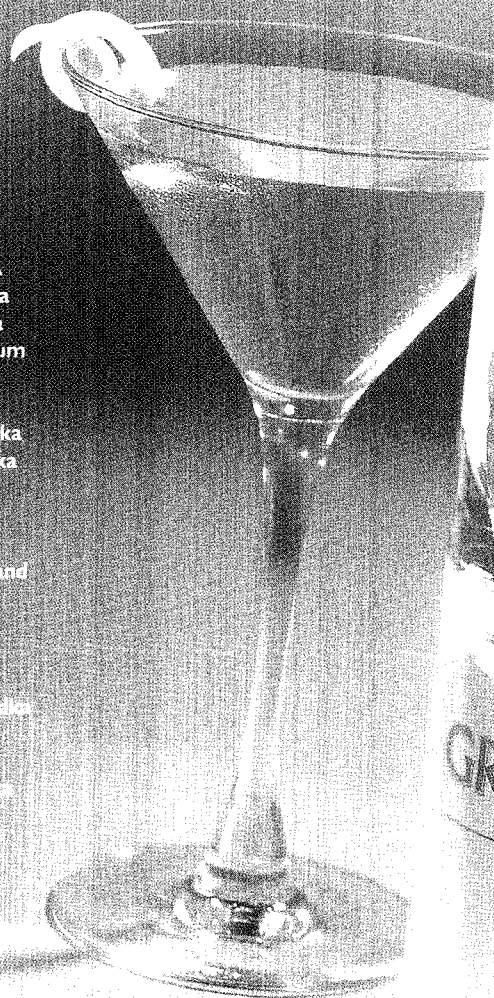
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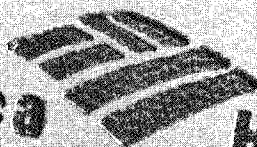
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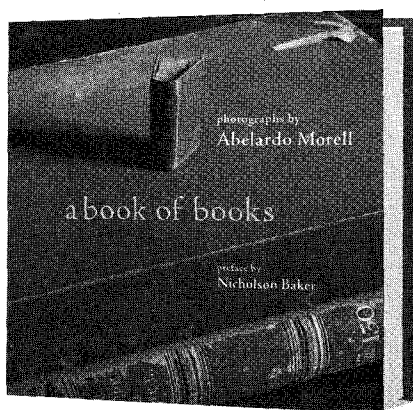


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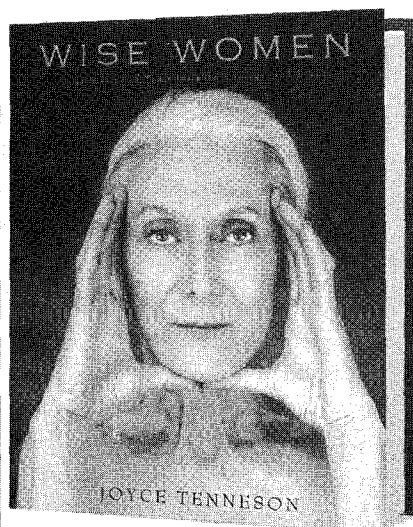
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THE MAIL

THE PRICE OF AUTISM

Susan Sheehan, in her article on autism, mentioned that my son Mark's diagnosis of autism inspired me to write the 1964 book "Infantile Autism," which destroyed the myth that autism is caused by bad mothering ("The Autism Fight," December 1st). Although Sheehan did a splendid job of describing the heart-rending problems faced by the parents of autistic children, I'm afraid that her article might have left some misapprehensions. I agree with her assessment of Applied Behavioral Analysis (A.B.A.) as being a very important development. When Mark was five, we were told that he was a hopeless case and should be institutionalized. We ignored the advice. He was still in diapers at age seven, and first used language meaningfully at eight and a half, soon after we started him on a program of A.B.A. and high-dose vitamin B₆. Mark, now an adult, is doing very well, and is an internationally recognized artist. But A.B.A. is by no means, as the article suggests, the only effective treatment. And, despite studies that claim otherwise, I do not believe that we are at the point at which the issue of vaccine damage can be ruled out as a cause of autism.

Bernard Rimland

*Director, Autism Research Institute
San Diego, Calif.*

Sheehan concludes her article by saying that there is no evidence that having one or two autistic children in a classroom is detrimental to other children; instead, she writes, their presence teaches "tolerance." As a school psychologist who has diagnosed and helped place many autistic children, I have a different perspective. A difficult autistic who is unmanageable at home often creates havoc in a regular class. Teachers, aides, or "shadows" are often poorly prepared, untrained, underpaid, and, even if they are competent, burn out. I have seen not only the tragedy of increased autism but also the fallout on excellent teachers who become overburdened with physically demanding work and an endless cycle of reports,

plans, and evaluations. And parents of non-autistic children can be aggressive, too, insisting that there be no disruptions in their children's education. The sad truth is that most non-autistic children shun their difficult classmates at the back of the room, even with the best efforts and intentions of the staff; and if the teacher devotes herself fully to helping the autistic adjust, something gets sacrificed, whether good lesson plans, classroom behavior, or the teacher's own supply of energy and creativity. It can be done, but rarely, and not forever. In the best of all worlds, people would always do their best, and children like Daniel and Grace Wagner would improve with around-the-clock intervention. But the system for delivering services to severely disabled kids is flawed, if only because it demands so much of people who are all too human.

Josie Martin

Santa Barbara, Calif.

It is important to keep in mind, reading Sheehan's piece, the financial realities that school districts face. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that school districts provide "free and appropriate" education for children with special needs. When IDEA was enacted, Congress promised to pay forty per cent of the average cost of the additional expenditures. But federal funding has never come close to meeting the need—in 2002, it covered only eighteen per cent of the costs. Instead, school districts must tap into their general funds in order to pay for special education, including services for children with autism, which in some districts cost as much as ten thousand dollars per student a month. Until the issue of funding is addressed, meeting the needs of these children will continue to be a struggle.

Liz Block

El Cerrito, Calif.

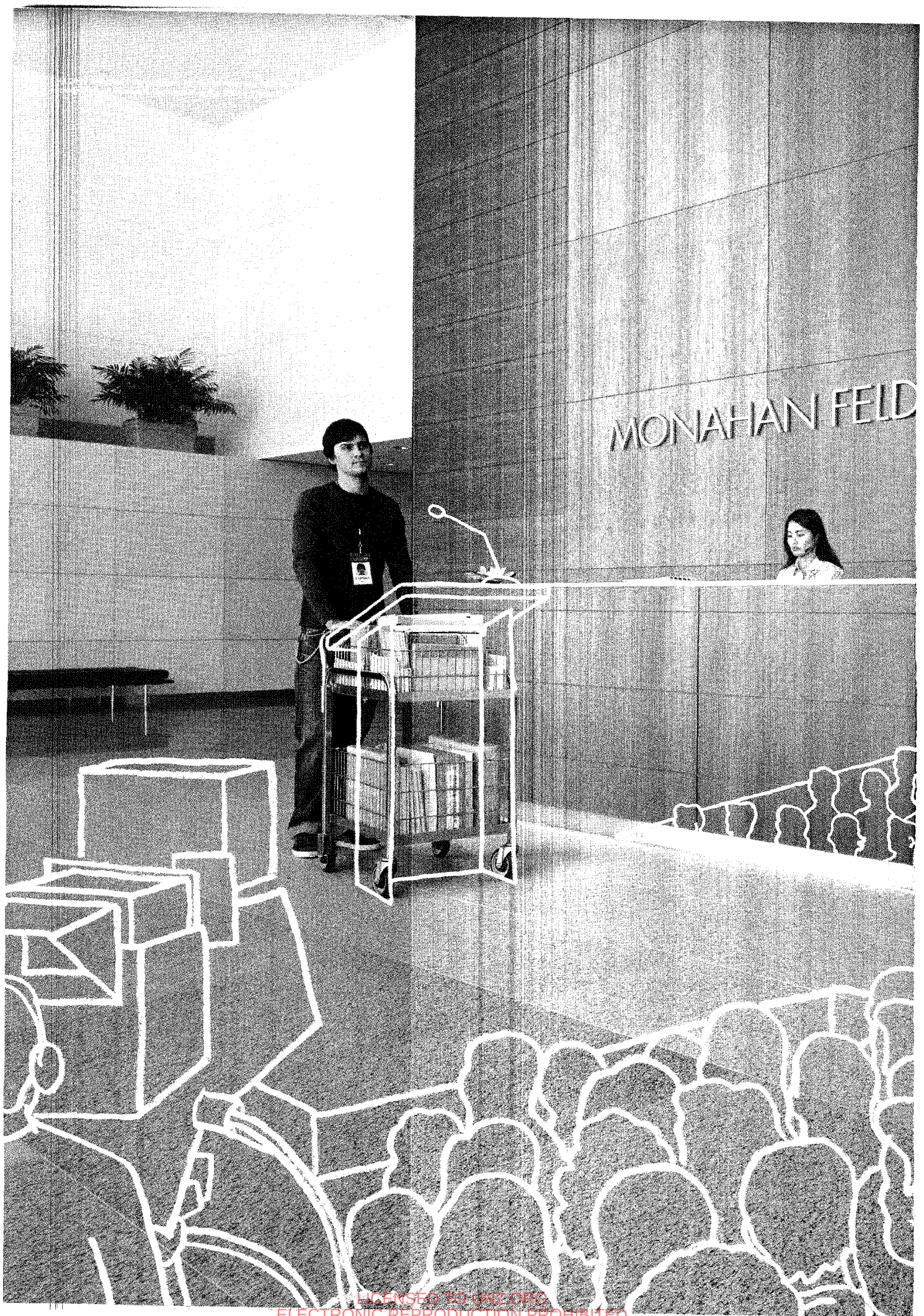
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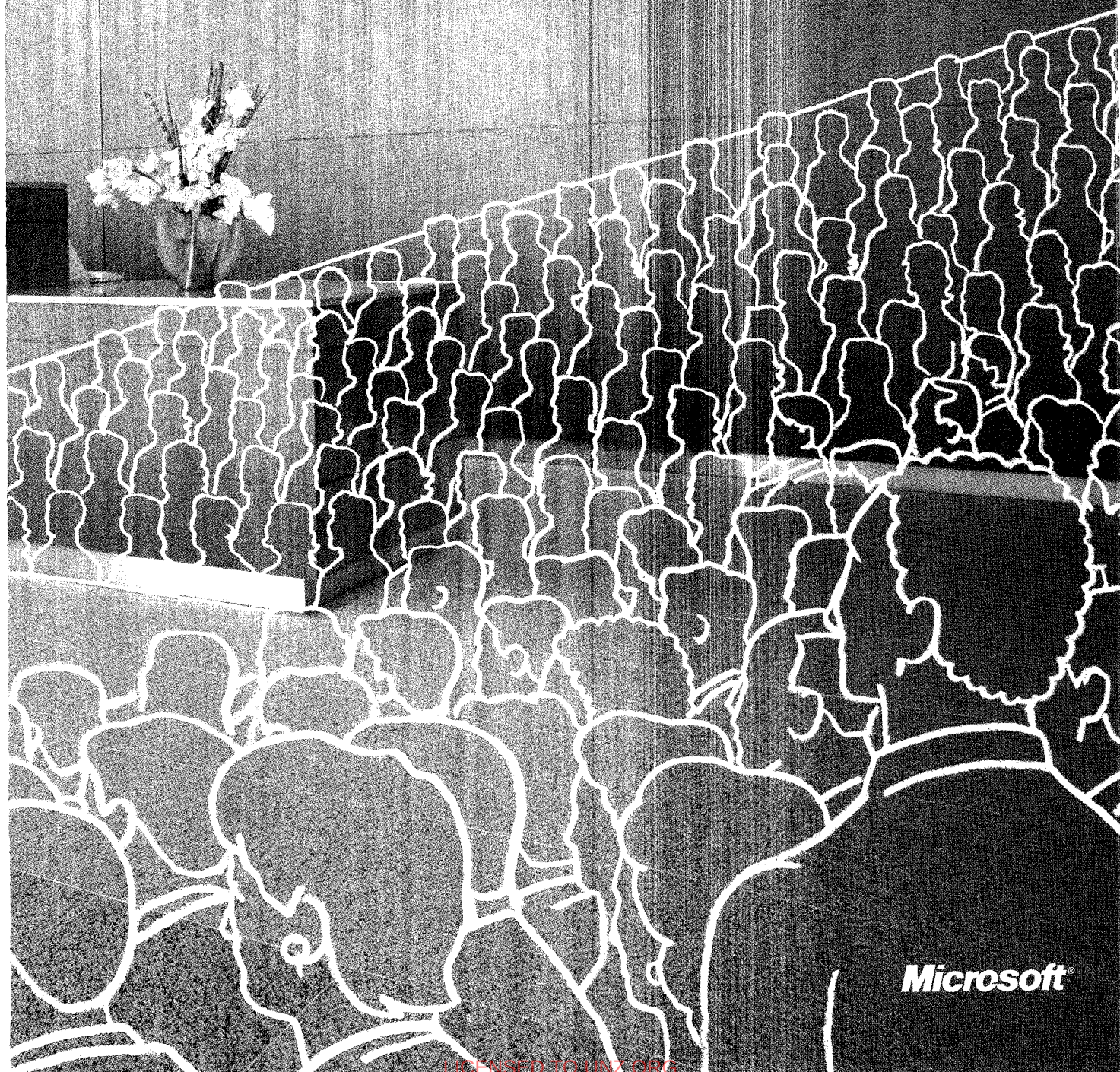
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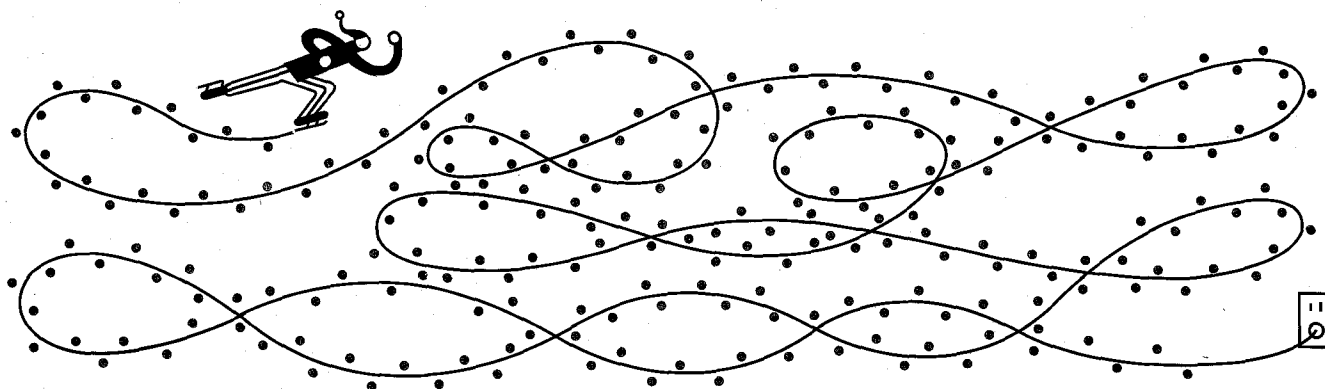
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



THE THEATRE OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

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AUNT DAN AND LEMON

Kristen Johnston is Aunt Dan and Lili Taylor is Lemon in the New Group's revival of Wallace Shawn's play about a friendship between an adult and a child. Directed by Scott Elliott. One preview on Dec. 17. Opens Dec. 18 at 8. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

THE LAST LETTER

Kathleen Chalfant plays a Russian Jew in Ukraine during the Second World War, in a new play directed by the documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, who adapted it from a chapter of Vasily Grossman's novel "Life and Fate." In previews. Opens Dec. 18 at 7. (Lucile Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-239-6200.)

ROSE'S DILEMMA

Patricia Hodges stars in a Manhattan Theatre Club production of a new play by Neil Simon, about a famous novelist who resolves to write a blockbuster. Directed by Lynne Meadow. In previews. Opens Dec. 18 at 8. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

OPENED RECENTLY

ANNA IN THE TROPICS

Nilo Cruz's simple, lyrical anecdote—about a Tampa, Florida, cigar factory in 1929, where a handsome "lector" (Jimmy Smits) reads "Anna Karenina" to the workers—is really a libretto for a musical, not a satisfying vehicle for the stage. Cruz's charming but thinly drawn characters cry out for song, not speech. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/1/03.) (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE BOY FROM OZ

The charming, wildly hardworking performer Hugh Jackman has been put in the awkward position of having to prove that the Australian singer-songwriter Peter Allen—who was discovered by Judy Garland and who married her daughter Liza Minnelli—is worthy of our attention. Just this side of overly hunky, Jackman does everything he can to sell the show, and the girls in the audience love him. But he is undermined by the production that swirls around him. (10/27/03) (Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE CARETAKER

In Harold Pinter's breakthrough play from 1960, two brothers—Aston, who is slow and deliberate,

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and Mick, a presentable sociopath—allow an old drifter named Davies to stay in their house, tacitly inviting him to mend their cracked minds and howling hearts, as if he were the father they'd been waiting for all their lives. In the Roundabout's production, Patrick Stewart, as Davies, and Kyle MacLachlan, as Aston, perform well under David Jones's sensitive direction; Aidan Gillen, as Mick, is both lethal and adorable, a cuddly gutter rat. (11/17/03) (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. Closes Jan. 4.)

CAROLINE, OR CHANGE

Tony Kushner's bittersweet autobiographical saga about two stranded souls—eight-year-old Noah Gellman (Harrison Chad), who is suffering from the twin griefs of a recently deceased mother and a newly acquired stepmother, and his family's satiric maid, Caroline Thibodeaux (Tonya Pinkins)—settles for no easy emotional solutions. Set in Louisiana in 1963, it takes the musical back to storytelling, to a moral universe, to a dissection of American society, and to folklore—that is, the lore of the folk, both black and white. With music by Jeanine Tesori. Directed by George C. Wolfe. (12/8/03) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200. Closes Jan. 4.)

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Radio City Entertainment's annual musical production of the classic Dickens tale marks its tenth and final year; Jim Dale stars as Scrooge. (Theatre at Madison Square Garden. 212-307-1000. Closes Dec. 27.)

CIRCUS OZ

The fourteen-member Australian company of clowns, gymnasts, contortionists, and one BMX biker make merry during a six-week run at the New Victory. (209 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 11.)

THE COOK

The gusto of Eduardo Machado's first-rate play is matched by the direction of Michael John Garcés, who begins the evening with a party in the lobby that segues into the first act, set amid the hubbub of a kitchen in a Havana mansion, in 1958. It is the last pre-Castro moment, and Machado uses the kitchen as a metaphor to examine the oppression and betrayals of both exile and revolution over a span of forty years. Zabryna

Guevara gives a luminous performance as the adroit, loyal cook, who keeps faith with her reactionary mistress only to learn in her old age that she herself has not been kept in mind. (Intar 53, at 508 W. 53rd St. 212-279-4200. Closes Jan. 4.)

DINNER WITH DEMONS

Second Stage presents the journalist, food writer, and playwright Jonathan Reynolds, who regales the audience with stories from his life and career while preparing an opulent meal. (307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

DUET

The ghost of Sarah Bernhardt drops by Eleonora Duse's dressing room one night in Pittsburgh in Otho Eskin's new play. Pamela Payton-Wright, as Duse, and Laura Esterman, as Bernhardt, give lustrious performances, managing to convey the actresses' vastly different acting styles without slipping into mimicry. Robert Emmet Lunney plays the various men in the women's lives. Cleanly directed by Ludovica Villar-Hauser. (Greenwich Street Theatre, 547 Greenwich St. 212-352-3101.)

FRAME 312

In Keith Reddins's play, set in the nineties, Lynette (Mary Beth Peil), a woman who possesses the original Zapruder film, is at a breaking point after keeping the footage secret for years. Flashbacks to the sixties illuminate her dilemma, showing how the young Lynette (Mandy Siegfried), as an eager-beaver editorial assistant at Time-Life, was entrusted with the reel by her dying boss (the terrific Larry Bryggman). Karen Kohlhaas directs. (Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.)

GOLDA'S BALCONY

In William Gibson's one-woman show about Golda Meir—the Russian immigrant from Wisconsin who helped create the state of Israel and eventually became its Prime Minister—Tovah Feldshuh shows how national and family passions blend in the heart, making dispassionate judgment impossible. Directed by Scott Schwartz. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

GOLF: THE MUSICAL

A revue of songs inspired by the sport of golf plays at the studio theatre at the John Houseman. (450 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

HANDY DANDY

Helen Gallagher and Nicolas Surovy star in a revival of William Gibson's comic drama about an activist nun and a conservative judge. Directed by Don Amendolia. (Neighborhood Playhouse, 340 E. 54th St. 212-239-2996. Closes Jan. 4.)

HENRY IV

A hero sandwich of sorts, Dakin Matthews's adaptation of Shakespeare's two-part chronicle of the wayward Prince Hal's succession to his



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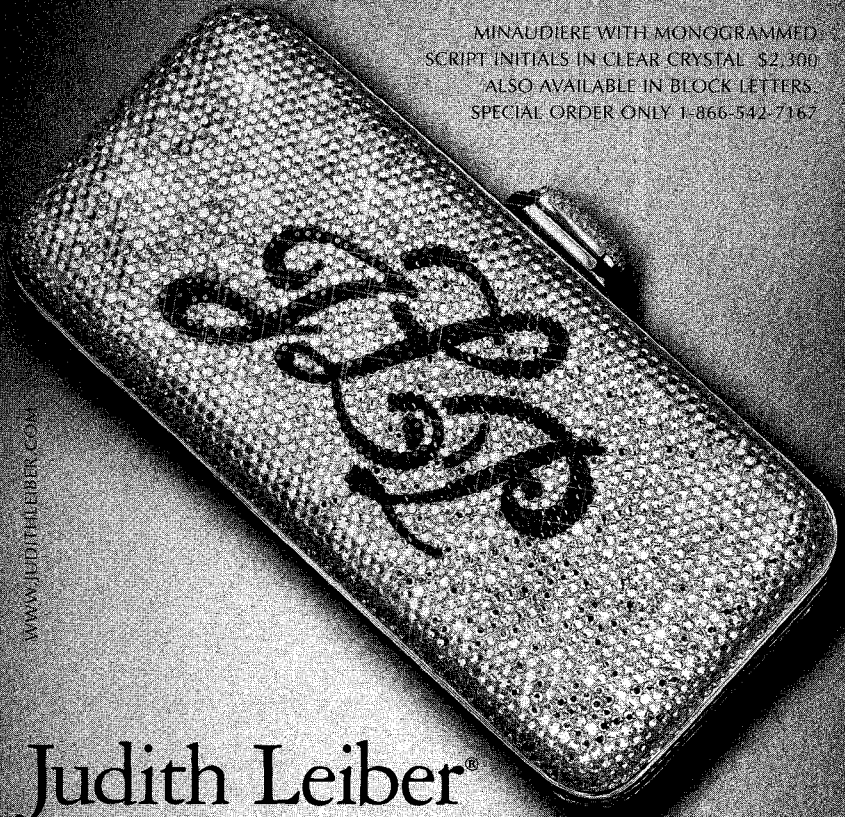
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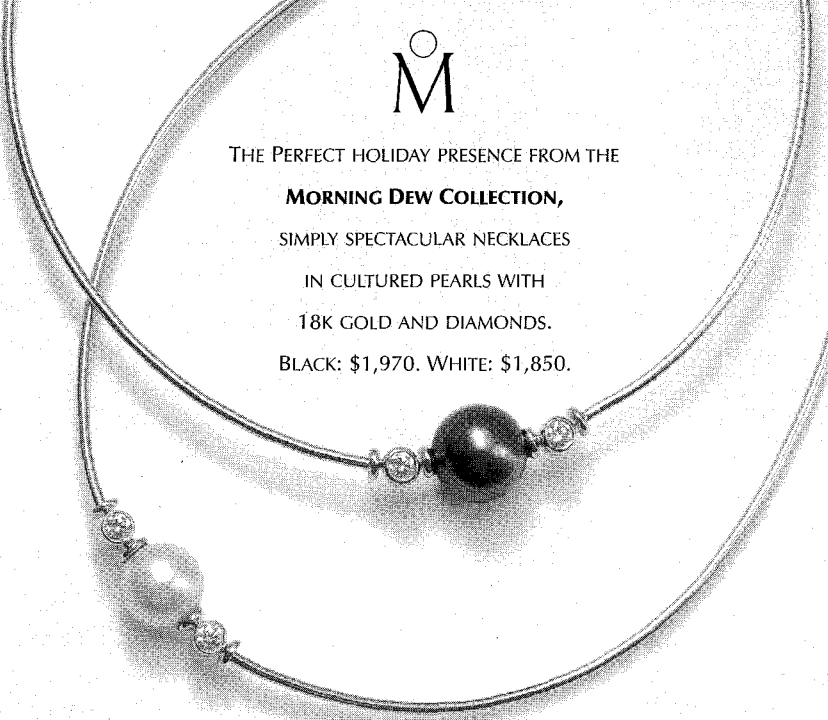
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father's throne is stuffed into one almost four-hour evening. As a study of public and private rebellion, "Henry IV" is as savvy today as it was when the first part was minted, in the winter of 1596, yet this production is emotionally lopsided. Ethan Hawke is excellent as the brave and bright Hotspur, but Michael Hayden's Hal (he replaced Billy Crudup in the production a month before performances began) conveys no real sense of the prince and brings little edge or patrician sang-froid to his character's louche liveliness—undermining his rapport with Falstaff (Kevin Kline). Directed by Jack O'Brien. (12/1/03) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

I AM MY OWN WIFE

Nothing can prepare you for this play's hero, Lothar Berfelde, a real-life German transvestite and collector who lived for decades in East Berlin as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, surviving first the Nazis, then the Stasi. As Jefferson Mays brilliantly embodies her, she is a meticulous, modest soul. What is sensational about her is her normality. The playwright, Doug Wright ("Quills"), conceives the evening as a sort of detective story to uncover the facts of Charlotte's life, and Mays plays all the characters with thrilling credibility. Strongly directed by Moisés Kaufman. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

JOSH KORNBLUTH'S LOVE AND TAXES

In his acidly funny monologue, about how his money problems (eighty thousand dollars of debt, following seven years of tax delinquency) stalled his marriage plans, Josh Kornbluth ("Red Diaper Baby," "Haiku Tunnel") takes shots at everyone from the I.R.S. to Hollywood producers to his Bay Area attorney to, ultimately, himself. (Bank Street Theatre, 155 Bank St. 212-868-4444.)

JUVENILIA

A bunch of college seniors suffer the consequences of a sex romp that gets out of hand in a new play by Wendy MacLeod ("The House of Yes"). The actors, notably the histrionic Aubrey Dollar, do an excellent job of portraying the shallow characters, but since the characters are drawn as examples of mediocrity, it's a losing proposition. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Closes Dec. 21.)

THE LADY NEXT DOOR

In the Folksbiene's spirited revival of a comedy from 1915 by Leon Kobrin, a love triangle between Eastern European immigrants turns a tenement into a Yiddish Melrose Place. With English supertitles. Directed by Allen Lewis Rickman. (Folksbiene Yiddish Theatre, J.C.C., 334 Amsterdam Ave. 212-239-6200.)

NEVER GONNA DANCE

Based on the classic 1936 movie "Swing Time," starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, this effervescent new musical is a scrapbook of Depression-era reality made Art Deco shiny. While trying to make good in Gotham, Lucky Garnett (Noah Racey) meets Penny (Nancy Lemenager), an innocent dance instructor with strawberry-blond sausage curls, and they join a dance competition. Racey is a strong dancer with a clean line, but he doesn't try to imitate Astaire or hide how hard this ambitious show is to perform. The feline and ferocious Deidre Goodwin is thrilling as Velma, one of their competitors. With songs by P. G. Wodehouse, Ira Gershwin, Johnny Mercer, and others. Directed by Michael Greif and choreographed by Jerry Mitchell. (12/15/03) (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

The black South African playwright and actor John Kani still has a few lessons to learn from his mentor and frequent collaborator, Athol Fugard. Whereas Fugard's domestic dramas about political unrest are the most clear-eyed vision of apartheid we have, Kani's play is sentimental and contrived, making invidious comparisons between the South Africans who toughed out life in the townships and the shirkers who hid out from the struggle abroad. Sipho Makhaya (Kani) is the father of the docile Thando (Warona Seane), whose English cousin, Mandisa (Esmeralda Bihl), arrives in the Old Country with a port-

folio of fashion drawings and lots of liquor and cigarettes. Mandisa upsets everything, and the obvious and stilted way that the plot unfolds taxes the audience's patience: it's South Africa for beginners. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

THE RADIO CITY CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR

The Rockettes perform their annual kickfest, alongside Santa, his reindeer, and assorted elves. (Radio City Music Hall, Sixth Ave. at 50th St. 212-247-4777. Through Jan. 4.)

THE REGARD EVENING

The Signature Theatre Company presents the second production of its Bill Irwin season, in which Irwin revives and expands his popular show from 1983, "The Regard of Flight," with members of the show's original cast. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

RIGHT YOU ARE (IF YOU THINK YOU ARE)

A revival of Luigi Pirandello's play, written in 1917. A sleepy Italian town is disrupted by the arrival of a man (Brennan Brown), his shadowy wife (Florescia Lozano), and his mother-in-law (the commanding Maria Tucci), each of whom believes the others are mad. In this production, by Tony Randall's National Actor's Theatre, long sheets of black glass distort the image of a commentator (Randall) who lurks in a corner, mocking the townspeople's attempts to make sense of the newcomers. In its time, Pirandello's play was incendiary; eighty years and countless productions later, the script's didacticism can be burdensome. Directed by Fabrizio Melano. (Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University, Spruce St. between Park Row and Gold St. 212-239-6200.)

ROAD HOUSE

A staged deconstruction of the Patrick Swayze movie from 1989 stars the kung-fu-flick star Taimak (in a blond mullet) and has moved from a successful run Off-Off Broadway to the Barrow Street Theatre. Directed by Timothy Haskell. (27 Barrow St., at Seventh Ave. 212-868-4444.)

SHOLOM ALEICHEM: NOW YOU'RE TALKING!

Saul Reichlin brings to life Aleichem's tales of the shtetl of Kasrilevkeh. (DR2 Theatre, 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE STORY

Tracey Scott Wilson's new play, written before the Jayson Blair scandal broke, puts questions of race and journalistic ethics under the magnifying glass. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

TALES FROM THE MANHATTAN WOODS

Frederick Stroppel has written a new book and lyrics for Strauss's "Die Fledermaus," turning the comic opera into a campy romp that takes place not in Vienna but in contemporary New York, in an Upper East Side penthouse, at a pretentious SoHo party, and in a dingy Brooklyn prison. The cast, in fine voice, has a grand time with deliberately stilted lyrics like "The days will tumble out like ketchup / till I have you in my embrace." The doe-eyed Elizabeth Hillebrand stands out as a naïve personal assistant. (Wings Theatre, 154 Christopher St. 212-627-2961.)

A VERY MERRY UNAUTHORIZED

CHILDREN'S SCIENTOLOGY PAGEANT

Les Frères Corbusier follow this summer's mischievous "President Harding Is a Rock Star" with a new musical that sends up the spooky mythos of the Church of Scientology. Against a pastel backdrop that resembles a Sunday-school wall hanging, a cast of fresh-faced, berobed children recount L. Ron Hubbard's teachings, mostly in song. Twelve-year-old Jordan Wolfe is side-splitting as the church's founder; he perfectly projects the dippy magnetism of a future cult leader. The show, which is only an hour long, feels like an extended Monty Python skit. Conceived and directed by Alex Timbers, with music and lyrics by Kyle Jarrow. (John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

WHERE WE'RE BORN

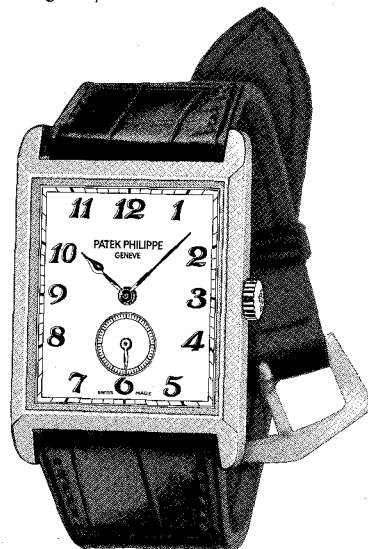
In Lucy Thurber's fatalistic drama, Lily returns from college to her grim Massachusetts home



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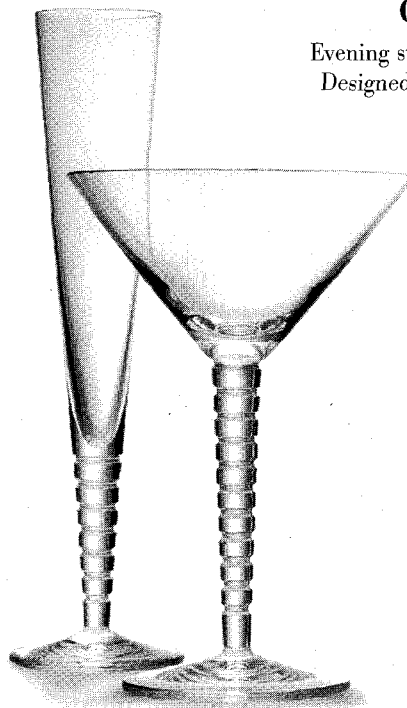


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town and falls in with her cousin Tony, a well-meaning blue-collar worker whose life is at a dead end at the age of twenty-three. The bond between the cousins (played by Marin Ireland and Thomas Sadowski) is complicated by Tony's girlfriend, Franky (the commanding Sara Surrey), who develops a passion for Lily, too, and lets the impulse move from unexpressed to explicit. Sharply directed by Will Frears. (Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444. Closes Dec. 21.)

WONDERFUL TOWN

The musical from 1953, about two spirited Ohio sisters' adventures in Greenwich Village, is a buoyant, beautifully staged revival that gives us back a thrilling glimpse of the gaiety, wit, confidence, and craft of the American musical in its populist heyday. The show boasts a well-played, fizzy Leonard Bernstein score and a terrific set of Comden and Green lyrics that stop the show several times, with a special huzzah for "One Hundred Easy Ways (to Lose a Man)." The excellent cast is superbly directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall. As Eileen, Jennifer Westfeldt swings, but Donna Murphy, as her sardonic, droll sister Ruth, owns the stage. This is one of those musicals that made the myth of Manhattan as an isle of joy. And after the sublimely silly seven-minute "Conga!" you almost believe it. (Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

LONG RUNS

AIDA

Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4747.

AVENUE Q

Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

THE BEARD OF AVON

New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200. (Closes Dec. 21.)

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747.

BECKETT/ALBEE

Century Center, 111 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.

BLUE MAN GROUP

Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 212-254-4370.

CABARET

Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200. (Closes Jan. 4.)

CARNIVAL KNOWLEDGE

SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-239-6200.

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

CHICAGO

Ambassador, 215 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.

DE LA GUARDA

Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E., at 15th St. 212-239-6200.

FAME ON 42ND STREET

Little Shubert, 422 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY 20TH

ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.

42ND STREET

Ford Center, 213 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100.

GYPSY

Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

HAIRSPRAY

Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100.

I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT,

NOW CHANGE

Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.

IRON

Manhattan Theatre Club, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. (Closes Dec. 21.)

THE LION KING

New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100.

MAMMA MIA!

Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-563-5544.

MOVIN' OUT

Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-307-4100.

NOBODY DON'T LIKE YOGI

Lamb's Theatre, 130 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

PRIVATE JOKES, PUBLIC PLACES

Theatre at the Center for Architecture, 536 LaGuardia Pl. 212-239-6200.

THE PRODUCERS

St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

RENT

Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 212-921-8000.

THE RETREAT FROM MOSCOW

Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

THE RIVALS

Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.

STOMP

Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at 8th St. 212-477-2477.

TAKE ME OUT

Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. (Closes Jan. 4.)

THE THING ABOUT MEN

Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 212-239-6200.

THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE

Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-307-4100.

TRUMBO

Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.

URINETOWN

Henry Miller, 124 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.

THE VIOLET HOUR

Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. (Closes Dec. 21.)

WICKED

Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET

In Balanchine's "Nutcracker," the Christmas party is gemütlich, the nightmare scary, the tree tall, and Candyland exactly what it should be: a child's dream of heaven. Tchaikovsky wrote the music at the peak of his powers as a fabulist, and Balanchine's imagination rose to meet it. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Dec. 17-18, Dec. 22, and Dec. 29-30 at 6; Dec. 19 at 8; Dec. 20 and Dec. 27 at 2 and 8; and Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 1 and 5. Through Jan. 4.)

SAVION GLOVER

The last time Glover performed at the Joyce, in 1991, he was a seventeen-year-old wunderkind who stole the show as a guest star. This time, the stage is all his—and for three weeks straight, in the longest run ever granted a tap dancer.

MAXIMILIAN BODE



Australia's whimsical "Circus Oz" has a six-week run at the New Victory.



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The format is informal, but expect extraordinary, exploratory improvisations by Glover (he's been deep into Coltrane lately), as well as precise group numbers he's choreographed for his latest company, Tii Dii. With its equal-gender ratio, the group is a testament to a seldom noticed aspect of Glover's influence: the rise of hard-hitting women. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 17-19 at 8, Dec. 20 and Dec. 27 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 2 and 7:30. Through Jan. 4.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE

Now in its forty-fifth year, the company faces a familiar problem: finding a repertory worthy of its superlative dancers. The answers this season include new productions of old hits—Judith Jamison's "Hymn" (1993) and Donald McKayle's "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder" (1959), as well as Robert Battle's new quartet "Juba," Alonzo King's "Heartsong," and Dwight Rhoden's "Bounty Verses," an ensemble piece for thirteen dancers, set to music by Steve Reich, Kurt Cobain, Bach, and Beethoven. ♦ Dec. 17 at 8: "Blues Suite," "Sarong," "Paramaribo," "Sweet Bitter Love," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 18 at 8: "Serving Nia," "Treading," "Night Creature," "Black Milk," and "Hymn." ♦ Dec. 19 at 8: "Memoria," "Bounty Verses," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 20 at 2: "Night Creature," "Cry," "Memoria," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 20 at 8: "Night Creature," "Sweet Bitter Love," "Serving Nia," "Black Milk," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 21 at 3: "Footprints," "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder," and "Heartsong." ♦ Dec. 21 at 7:30: "Juba," "Treading," "Bounty Verses," and "Grace." ♦ Dec. 23 at 9: "Memoria," "Episodes," and "The Winter in Lisbon." ♦ Dec. 24 at 8, Dec. 27 at 2, and Dec. 28 at 7:30: Ailey classics. ♦ Dec. 25 at 8: "Episodes," "Hymn," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 26 at 8: "Bounty Verses," "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder," and "Heartsong." ♦ Dec. 27 at 8: "Footprints," "Juba," "Heartsong," and "Night Creature." ♦ Dec. 28 at 3: "Episodes," "Serving Nia," "Black Milk," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 30 at 8: "Bounty Verses," "Footprints," and "Heartsong." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through Jan. 4.)

"CENTRAL STATION"

The festival of Eastern and Central European choreographers concludes with a shared evening of works by younger artists. In "Just . . ." the Russian dancer Daria Buzovkina, who performed in last week's "The Swan Lake," plays virtuoso hopschotch in a shifting spotlight, accompanied by the music of the Russian folk-rock group Nol. In the casual and goofy "Walking Home Solo"—a reverie on ideas of belonging—Kaja Kann, Jarmo Karing, and Tiina Mölder, an Estonian trio who call themselves the United Dancers of ZUGA, advocate, among other sentiments, "being simply beautiful like a tree, or a foot with toes." "Open," a solo by Karing, is danced by Annika Üprus. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Dec. 18-20 at 7:30.)

LA MAMA ETC.

Two very different flamenco performances under one roof. In the Annex, Maria Elena Anaya presents "De Pasiones sin Retorno" ("Passions with No Return"), a traditional program that includes recorded music by Rachmaninoff and Piazzolla and live music performed by guitarists and singers. In the first-floor theatre, Indalo Artists present "Accadde Domani" ("It Happened Tomorrow"), adapted by Shigeko Suga, a Butoh-

and flamenco-driven interpretation of a play by Franca Rame and Dario Fo. (74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. "De Pasiones sin Retorno": Dec. 18-20 at 7:30 and Dec. 21 at 2:30 and 7:30. "Accadde Domani": Dec. 18-20 at 8.)

"DANCE CONVERSATIONS"

In Neta Pulvermacher's innovative series at the Flea Theatre, an eclectic assortment of choreographers present new work, and each performance is followed by a discussion between the artist and the audience. In the final session of the fall, the featured artists are Pat Catterson, Jane Gabriel, Ellen Cornfield, Heather Kravas, and Chase Granoff. (41 White St. For more information, call 212-226-2407. Dec. 16 at 7.)



"The Lady Next Door," a comic drama at the Folksbiene.

"DANCE IN PROGRESS"

In a quirky program assembled by Sarah Michelson, the emerging choreographers Maria Hassabi, Adrienne Truscott, Chris Yon, and Greg Zucolo show enigmatic new works, including Yon's "Un Éléphant Terrible" and Zucolo's backhanded homage to Calvin Klein. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. Dec. 18-19 at 8.)

"BETWEEN THE TIDES"

The Joyce SoHo hosts an evening of dances by Maxine Steinman, including "Underfrost," about a red rose, "Barzel," inspired by the strong female characters of the best-selling book "The Red Tent," and "Let Go," a trio set to Arvo Pärt's "Fratres" that explores the bonds between men. (155 Mercer St. 212-334-7479. Dec. 18-20 at 8.)

NEW YORK THEATRE BALLET

The company presents its hour-long, family-friendly version of "The Nutcracker." With costumes by the Metropolitan Opera's Sylvia Taal-sohn Nolan and sets by Gillian Bradshaw-Smith. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 212-355-6160. Dec. 20-21 at 11 A.M., 1, and 3:30.)

NIGHT LIFE CONCERTS

JANE SIBERRY

The eccentric Canadian vocalist presents a program of classical holiday songs by Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, and others. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Dec. 17 at 8.)

CYNDI LAUPER

Lauper has never been able to shake the public's perception of her as a nutty neon-haired siren, and her tireless attempts to showcase her serious side (and underrated vocal chops) have brought her only modest success. Her latest album, "At Last," finds her trying her hand at standards by Burt Bacharach, Smokey Robinson, and Etta James. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 212-307-7171. Dec. 18 at 8.)

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

Wynton Marsalis's longtime bandmates—Wess Anderson, Joe Temperley, Reginald Veal, Wycliffe Gordon, and Herlin Riley—join him, the charming pianist Bill Charlap, the New Orleans banjo player Don Vappie, and others for an evening of Big Easy favorites. (Alice Tully Hall, 212-721-6500. Dec. 18-19 at 8 and Dec. 20 at 2 and 8.)

"HOLY GROUND"

The Klezmatics and Arlo Guthrie sing the Jewish songs of Woody Guthrie, which he wrote with the help of his mother-in-law, the Yiddish poet Aliza Greenblatt. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 20 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL

237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Dec. 29: Paul Green's Original School of Rock. You've seen the movie. Now see the stage show, straight from Philadelphia: kids who have been studying power chords since their preteen years.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Dec. 26-28: The Fab Faux, a Beatles cover band featuring Will Lee, of "The Late

Show with David Letterman," and Jimmy Vivino, of "Late Night with Conan O'Brien." They may not have Sir George Martin on board, but they do have a fifth vocalist to help out with the complicated studio arrangements of the Beatles' later output. Dec. 30-31: Patti Smith celebrates the New Year.

FEZ

380 Lafayette St. (212-533-7000)—Dec. 19: The singer-songwriter David Poe presents his annual "Holiday Freak-Out." The Mingus Big Band still packs them in every Thursday. Dining.

IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 26-27: They Might Be Giants. The lauded Brooklyn alternative duo, the subject of "Gigantic," a documentary just released on DVD, is touring to promote its latest project, a book and CD called "Bed Bed Bed." Dec. 28-29: The incendiary bluesman Buddy Guy.

JOE'S PUB

425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Dec. 18: In 1983, Nina Hagen defined New York's New Wave underground with the club hit "New York, New York." Her latest album, "BigBand Explosion," eschews the current eighties revival and embraces

TABLES FOR TWO



CAPITALE

130 Bowery, at Grand St. (212-334-5500)—This temple of extravagance and confusion, an 1894 Beaux Arts landmark designed by Stanford White, originally housed the Bowery Savings Bank. The words "Your financial welfare is the business of this bank" are inscribed in big block letters over the door. The space is tremendous: nearly an acre of marble, forested with Corinthian columns and Jurassic potted palms. The banquettes swallow you up; even tall patrons look like kids at the grownups' table (a friend measuring six feet five resorted to sitting on the wine list, which has the left, if not quite the range, of the Hoboken phone book). Waiters in brown bank-clerk outfits patrol the floor like park rangers, though they often seem lost—ask them what's good and they tell you what's popular. Rounding out the bewildering atmosphere is the music: boomer pop courtesy of satellite radio. Sting's hideous ululations on "Desert Rose" bounce off the marble as you chip away at a burger-size terrine of foie gras. You may feel that you are trapped in a Jaguar commercial.

So what kind of people come to a place like this? "Circus freaks," a bartender said the other night, referring to the celebrities who'd recently thrown private parties there. He reeled off some names: 50 Cent, Elton John, Britney Spears, the Stones. Capitale, it turns out, does much of its business in private events. But plebes can eat like circus freaks, too; on the menu, there's a little portico icon (evocative of Capitale's façade) next to each dish that's "available for banquet service in our ballroom & private dining rooms."

This invocation of the steam table (and the third-grade spelling) is a disservice to the chef, Fred Brightman. The food, surprisingly, is good. The escabeche, little strips of yellowtail snapper in a citrus vinaigrette, and the upland-cress salad (which in the fall was a sweet evergreen-tomato salad but, no matter the season or the name, is really a barbecued-pork-belly salad) are clever and clean and evocative of smaller rooms and lower ceilings. Among the entrées, the fluke pavé, with chanterelles, spinach, a trace of crumbled pistachio, and a ginger-Kaffir-lime sauce, is the bargain in the bunch; the waiter, citing popular demand, pushes the rib eye—the most expensive dish. So much for your financial welfare. (Open Monday through Saturday for dinner. Entrées \$18-\$37.)

—Nick Paumgarten

swing jazz. She's here for a holiday show with Theo Kogan, of the eighties art rockers the Lunachicks, René Risqué, the city's resident Euro-trash poser, Fisherman's Xylophonic Orchestra, and others. Dec. 31: Eartha Kitt.

KNITTING FACTORY

74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—Dec. 24-25: "What I Like About Jew," the satirical review featuring and created by Sean Altman and Rob Tannenbaum, celebrates its fourth birthday with two nights of song and comedy. The performers include the comedian Todd Barry and the "born again" singer Miss Tammy Faye Starlite. Expect new political fare and old favorites, including "Hanukah with Monica," as in Lewinsky.

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Dec. 21: Mudhoney never quite generated the sales figures of its peers Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam, but it helped put Seattle on the rock-and-roll map. The band's guitarist Steve Turner recently recorded a solo album of original material, "Searching for Melody," that owes more to folk music than to the punky rock of his other outfit.

NORTHSIX

66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—Dec. 16: Yo La Tengo and the Walkmen ring in the holidays. Dec. 19: The Secret Machines, an indie-rock trio from Texas, take a psychedelic approach that calls to mind Pink Floyd. With TV on the Radio and Just a Fire. Dec. 22 and Dec. 29: The edgy urban folktales of Richard Buckner.

NUBLU

62 Avenue C, between 4th and 5th Sts. (212-979-9925)—Wednesdays: A little over a year ago, the percussionist Mauro Refosco thought it would be fun to celebrate his birthday with the music of Luiz Gonzaga, a cowboy accordionist who popularized *forró*, the blue-collar party music from Brazil's northeastern interior. Refosco, a veteran of the Lounge Lizards and David Byrne's bands, called upon the guitarist Smokey Hormel and the accordionist Rob Curto, and the band *Forró in the Dark* was born. The name *forró* purportedly comes from a mispronunciation of words on signs posted by nineteenth-century English railroad workers in Pernambuco. The workers' dances, which were open to everyone in the area, were marked "For All." You won't need a caipirinha to put you in the mood for dancing.

PIANOS

158 Ludlow St. (212-505-3733)—Dec. 17: The downtown quartet Shelby breaks out new songs from its forthcoming guitar-and-violin-fuelled record, "The Luxury of Time." Dec. 19: Seksu Roba, a Los Angeles-based theremin-and-keyboard duo, makes exotic soundtracks for intergalactic dance parties. The name is Japanese for "sex donkey," and their songs almost always point to the shedding of clothes and inhibitions.

S.O.B.'S

204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (212-243-4940)—Dec. 18: The reggae legend Sugar Minott. Dining.

VOLUME

99 N. 13th St., at Wythe Ave., Brooklyn—Dec. 18: This soon-to-open Williamsburg gallery and party space hosts a benefit for the nonprofit arts presenters Creative Time, with the up-and-coming rockers the Liars, the Rogers Sisters, and Blood on the Wall. For more information, call 212-206-6674, ext. 2.

WEBSTER HALL

125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—Dec. 20: Nina Hagen (see Joe's Pub) leaves the big-band arrangements behind for a rock show.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL

59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Andrea Marcovicci is at work in the Oak Room, performing the songs of Frank Loesser ("Guys and Dolls," "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying").

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Through Dec. 21: Now that the critical tumult about whether Jane Monheit was a symbol of good or evil for mainstream jazz singing is over, it's difficult to understand why she caused such a ruckus. With her silken tone, easy swing, and traditionalist values, Monheit isn't in the business of expanding the boundaries of her art. But if the simple pleasure of hearing well-sung standards is what you're after, she's your gal. Dec. 23-28: A tribute to Nat (King) Cole featuring Nat's brother Freddie Cole, a marvellously genial vocalist in his own right, and the keyboardist Monty Alexander, who's celebrated the legendary pianist and singer on albums and in special performances over the years.

CARLYLE HOTEL

Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wrap-around murals, and, through Dec. 31, Bobby Short.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through Dec. 27: As ecumenical as he is enthusiastic, Michael Feinstein presents his annual Great American Holiday Songbook program.

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as her wry, knowing
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—Publishers Weekly, starred review

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and keen receptivity to the ridiculous
and the sublime, Vapnyar portrays
resilient individuals who counter
loss and displacement with a covert
faith in romance."** —Booklist

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IRIDIUM

1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—
Through Dec. 21: The legacy of Jaco Pastorius, the
innovative bassist who died in 1987, at age thirty-
six, isn't fading. The **Jaco Pastorius Big Band** pays
tribute with Jimmy Haslip (Tuesday and Wednes-
day), Victor Wooten (Thursday and Friday), and
Gerald Veasley (Saturday and Sunday). Dec. 23-
28: McCoy Tyner lends inimitable piano playing
to his All-Star Big Band. Mondays belong to the
electric-guitar pioneer Les Paul.

JAZZ GALLERY

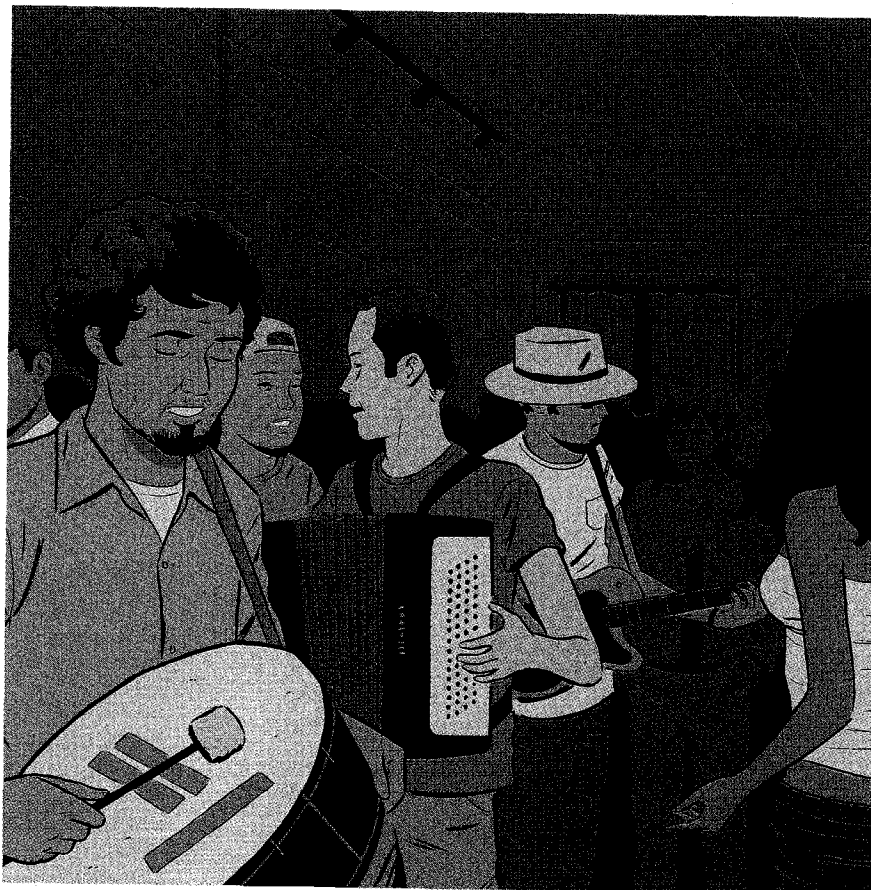
290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—
There's plenty of history in the keys of the seven-foot

STANHOPE HOTEL

Fifth Ave. at 81st St. (212-650-4737)—Wednes-
days through Saturdays through Dec. 27: The
debonair pianist and singer **Steve Ross** pays tribute
to the city he loves with "My Manhattan," a pro-
gram of songs by the likes of Vernon Duke, Ste-
phen Sondheim, and Kander & Ebb.

SWEET RHYTHM

88 Seventh Ave. S., at Bleecker St. (212-255-
3626)—Dec. 19-20: The **John Hicks** trio. Hicks's
passionate, whiplash keyboard excursions are
as bracing now as they were when he was first
gaining attention with Art Blakey and others in
the sixties.



The band Forró in the Dark livens up Nublu, in the East Village, on Wednesdays.

Baldwin piano in this loft space. It was played by
such giants as Tommy Flanagan and Jimmy Rowles
in the sorely missed Village club Bradley's. On Dec.
18, Luis Perdomo and **Raymond Angry** join forces to
communicate with the spirits. The following Satur-
day nights, two fine, still-evolving tenor saxophon-
ists, most often seen as sidemen for others, bring in
their own bands—the **Ravi Coltrane** quartet on Dec.
20 and the **Greg Tardy** quintet on Dec. 27.

JAZZ STANDARD

116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Dec. 18-21: The
Houston Person quartet. Person, an earthy tenor sax-
ophonist who was the late Etta Jones's longtime part-
ner, has lost none of his power to charm an audience.
Dec. 23: The trombonist **Josh Roseman** has made a
big noise with everyone from Dave Holland and Dave
Douglas to Sheryl Crow and Sean Lennon. He ap-
pears here with his own band and his special guest
Russell Gunn, on trumpet. Dec. 26-28: "Three Guitars"
features a trio of fluid stylists from three distinct
generations: the six-string patriarch **Larry Coryell**, the
established maestro **John Abercrombie**, and the youn-
ger Brazilian singer and guitarist **Badi Assad**.

NEUE GALERIE

1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200, ext.
107)—Dec. 18: The vocal virtuoso **Theo Bleck-
mann** may be best known from the avant-garde
doyenne **Meredith Monk's** ensembles; here, he in-
dulges his passion for classic art songs.

TONIC

107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Dec. 17: The
bassist **Mario Pavone** works his strings with the
force and persistence of a sculptor chipping away at
granite. The sheer dynamism of his playing is
matched by the lustre of his writing and arranging
for small bands; he's here with his **Nu Trio/Quintet**.

UP OVER JAZZ CAFE

351 Flatbush Ave., at Seventh Ave., Brooklyn
(718-398-5413)—Dec. 19-20: **David Weiss** knows
the hard-bop-trumpet literature, having worked
closely with **Freddie Hubbard**, a master of the
idiom. He brings his horn and a savvy sextet to this
ever-ambitious club. Dec. 26-27: The rough-and-
ready tenor saxophonist **Eric Alexander** draws on
the Chicago horn tradition, channelling the energy,
authority, and tonal girth of players like **Johnny
Griffin** and **Gene Ammons**.

VILLAGE VANGUARD

178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—
For two weeks, the pianist **Cedar Walton** will be at
the helm of the Vanguard's hallowed bandstand.
Through Dec. 21: **Jackie McLean**, an alto saxo-
phonist who honed his art alongside **Miles Davis**
and **Sonny Rollins**, joins Walton's sleek trio. Dec.
23-28: **Vincent Herring**, a younger player with a
pointed tone and biting phrasing, takes over on the
saxophone. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds
sway on Mondays.

ADRIAN TOMINE



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A photograph from 2002, taken by Elliot Erwitt, shown in a fifty-year retrospective of his work at the Leica gallery.

ART MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-879-5500)—You wouldn't expect to find a subversive agenda in "Crossing the Channel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism," but there is one: proving that the English and French did get along, Waterloo notwithstanding. Examples of artistic cross-influence are on display throughout the galleries: Bonington trying Corot-style plein-air painting; Paul Huet copying Constable; Delacroix taking inspiration from Shakespeare, Byron, and Scott and even trying his hand at watercolors, which French critics considered a ridiculous "English medium." The large-scale copy of Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" at the exhibition's entrance is a bit puzzling (the original never leaves the Louvre), but his famous "Monomania" portraits—which could be up-to-date takes on neurotic New Yorkers—are not to be missed. Through Jan. 4. ♦ Two retrospectives, of the works of Philip Guston and El Greco. Through Jan. 4 and Jan. 11, respectively. ♦ "Bravehearts: Men in Skirts" looks at the many cultures in which men wear skirts and the various uniformly unsuccessful attempts of fashion designers to add the item to the wardrobes of the men in this culture. Through Feb. 8. ♦ "Treasures of a Lost Art: Italian Manuscript Painting of the Middle Ages and Renaissance." Through Feb. 1. ♦ "The Dawn of Photography: French Daguerreotypes, 1839-1855." Through Jan. 4. ♦ "Dreams of Yellow Mountain: Landscapes of Survival in Seventeenth-Century China." Through Jan. 25. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA PONS)

33rd St. at Queens Blvd., Long Island City (212-708-9400)—For "Artist's Choice: Mona Hatoum, Here Is Elsewhere," the Palestinian and British art-

ist chooses works from the museum's permanent collection, including examples by Cindy Sherman, Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Francis Alys. Through Feb. 2. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 10 to 5, and Friday evenings until 7:45.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—"James Rosenquist" is a pinball machine of a retrospective, gracing the museum's ramp with two-dimensional equivalents of rackety lights and bumpers. The early Pop work, which uses billboard-painting techniques to create surrealistic montages of slightly outdated magazine imagery, feels immortal. It nails a recurrent concern of modernity: the rolling blind spot of the recent past. Bigger, slicker later paintings succumb to mere razzmatazz. But Rosenquist earns blanket forgiveness on the strength of his classic "F-111" (1964-65), a multi-panelled wraparound work, eighty-six feet long, that distills the madnesses of the nineteen-sixties with supple, violent majesty. Through Jan. 25. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3676)—It was easy to predict that "Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective of Drawings" would be a ravishing show, but it was harder to foresee how powerfully it would argue for Gorky as the most gifted of all American artists. Right from the start, in the early nineteen-twenties, until the exceedingly bitter end, in the year of his suicide, 1948, Gorky was a draftsman of unequalled, at times almost unbearable sensitivity. Whether he's working in pencil, ink, charcoal, pastel, or crayon, form melts and jells in shallow, tactile depth at his sensuous touch. Lines are like exposed nerves, colors like inflammations. Nearly every picture burns with intelligent, vulnerable life. Through Feb. 15. ♦ The sparkling mid-career painting retrospective "John Currin" will be this season's major conversation piece. Topic: how have super-old-fashioned, alternately academic- and schlocky-looking figure paintings become the bee's

knees in contemporary art? Currin's mostly imagined winsome nudes, pathetic males, society dames, gay couples, and, oh yes, women with breasts as big as the Ritz make everybody nervous in one way or another. They also display phenomenal degrees of skill and subtleties of expression. Once you start looking at Currin's stuff, it's all you can do to stop. Through Feb. 22. ♦ "Unrepentant Ego: The Self-Portraits of Lucas Samaras." Through Feb. 8. (Open Wednesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

DIA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

548 W. 22nd St. (212-989-5566)—Pierre Huyghe may be Parisian, but he takes a Hollywood approach. He delivers spectacular entertainment with an emphasis on childlike awe (Spielberg looms large, as the close encounters of his recent show at the Guggenheim revealed). Here sections of wall slide along tracks to create a room within the gallery. When the walls meet, a film screens; when it ends, the walls roll away. Onscreen, woodland creatures romp in trees behind tract houses. Costumed children—bunnies, owls, and cardboard boxes—eat rainbow-colored doughnuts. A giant balloon stands in for the moon as day turns to night. The non-narrative style is sweet but aimless, like Huyghe's imagined audience, which asks nothing more of art than it does of the movies: to sit passively back and enjoy the show. Through Jan. 11. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 6.)

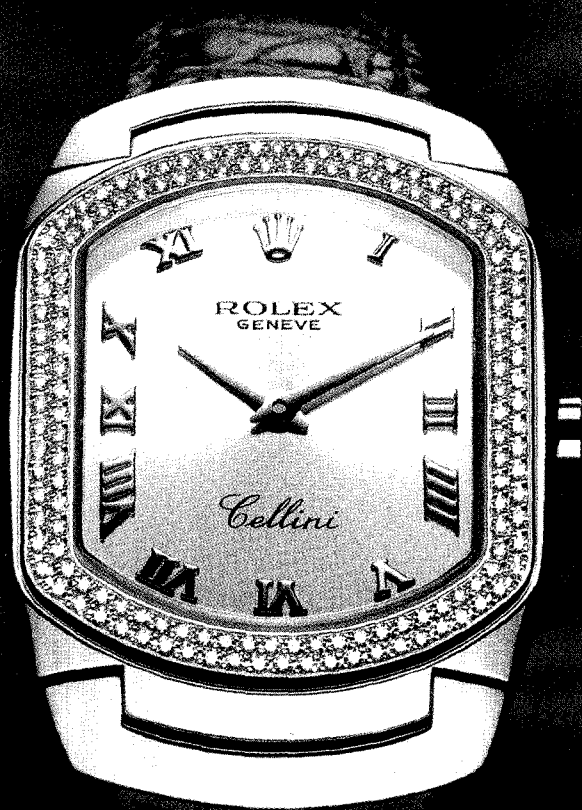
GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

VICTOR BRAUNER

This largely unknown Surrealist has an impeccable claim to the title: he made exquisite-corpse draw-

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New York

ings with artists like Yves Tanguy and Raoul Ubac, and he showed up in those annual Surrealist class photos—but his name was left out at the printer's and had to be handwritten in later. This survey includes glossy panel paintings from the thirties and forties that feature hollow-eyed spectres, half-human beasts, and Daliesque constructions, and works from the fifties, colorful figures on wood that were somewhat popular in France, which conjure up Klee. Through Jan. 17. (Ubu, 416 E. 59th St. 212-534-4444.)

ANTHONY CARO

Caro is looking exceptionally good—and nowhere near eighty—in the photo hanging above the front desk. The rest of the gallery looks like a machine shop: it's full of rusted steel hulks welded and left to oxidize. Some, like "Table Bronze 'Chemical Box,'" are rectilinear with compartments; others, like "Writing Piece 'Below,'" look like something that the former assistant to Henry Moore shaped with his bare hands. Through Dec. 27. (Artemis Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444.)

Short List

KIM SOOJA

The Project, 37 W. 57th St. 212-688-4673. Through Dec. 20.

GALLERIES—CHelsea

JEREMY BLAKE

It would have seemed fair to argue that the glamour of late-sixties London is finally, decisively exhausted—until Jeremy Blake came along with this very hip, very now digital video, "Reading Ossie Clark," based on the designer's gossip diaries. It's a coolly psychedelic wash of images that incorporates film, photography, drawing, painting, computer-generated abstractions, and a witty, haunting voice-over culled from Clark's diaries and read by art-world doyenne Clarissa Dalrymple. Through Dec. 20. (Feigen, 535 W. 20th St. 212-929-0500.)

LIZ CRAFT

Craft brings a deft California sensibility to the treatment of aging hippie culture. "Lounging Lady," the diminutive bronze at the door depicting a sagging gal in a bikini, is followed by "Birdman," a giant hand (middle finger raised) on spindly legs. The kitschy or sentimental message of some of the pieces—a skeleton in a top hat braiding a unicorn's tail and the guitar-playing figure in "Ballad of the Hippie" dwarfed by a vinelike column of smoke—is offset by the pile of "Poop with Flies," cast in bronze for eternity. Through Dec. 20. (Boesky, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9889.)

GLENN LIGON

"Bright," "easily bored," "not always working to potential," "now sullen, now inspired"—if these comments from Glenn Ligon's seventh-grade teachers can be believed, the forty-two-year-old artist had a creative personality from the start. These carefully typed reports accompany a split-screen video detailing a session with the artist's therapist; we hear both voices but see only the analyst's empty chair and the analyst's crossed

ankles or gesturing hands. A canvas that features an outline of Malcolm X culled from a "Black Power" coloring book hangs nearby; Ligon has added hectic spots of clownlike color on the strangely paper-white cheeks to create a sort of portrait of the artist as a kid in the seventies. Through Dec. 23. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)

MORRIS LOUIS

The late fifties were big for Louis (1912-62). Getting out of a cab one day, he met Barnett Newman, thereby gaining entrée into the upper echelons of the New York art world; when paintings for his first

which isn't here)—a conceit that becomes clear only after taking in their palette of chlorine blue, flamingo pink, and Coca-Cola caramel. Through Dec. 20. (Petzel, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467.)

JACK PIERSON

The central assemblage in Pierson's new show is called "A Vignette Contrived of Various Objects Depicting the Artist in His Fortieth Year," and it includes, among other tchotchkes, a David Hockney etching, the "Physician's Desk Reference," a classical bust draped in a surfer's pukka-shell necklace, and a busted carousel horse sprawled on a divan. It's Oscar Wilde gone to Miami Beach: gaudy, breezy, and snarkily sentimental. Through Jan. 3. (Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727.)

SERGIO PREGO

The walls close in, literally, in Prego's installation. Huge, crazily tilted panels attached to hydraulic arms lean dangerously into the room and then slide back, turning the white box of the gallery into a kind of slapstick minimalist sculpture. The young Spanish artist continues this game of deadpan physical comedy in a video called "Cowboy Inertia Creeps," in which a man's prone body seems to shoot like a missile along a concrete embankment. Through Dec. 20. (Lombard Freid, 531 W. 26th St. 212-967-8040.)

GREGOR SCHNEIDER

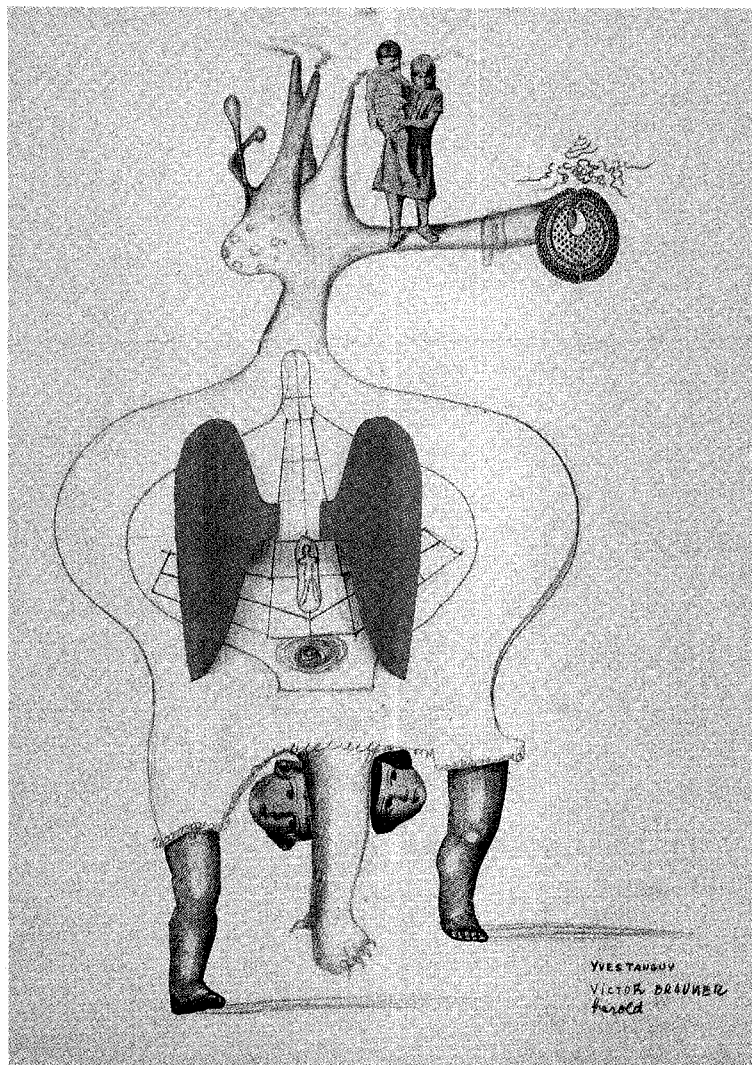
Before the galleries came, outer Chelsea was the taxi-garage district; still is, in parts. So it's easy for passersby to get confused when, walking down West Twenty-fourth Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, they notice an alleylike space right next to the Barbara Gladstone gallery: a narrow, oil-stained lair lit by a lone bare bulb, screened from the street by a roll-down metal gate. The gate's half open, but there's nothing inside but a dirty sidewalk, a storm drain, and a scuffed curb. Such bleak verisimilitude is Gregor Schneider's trademark, and the young German artist's fabrication is a tour de force of nondescriptness. Through Dec. 31. (Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300.)

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

Schoolwerth, who lives in Brooklyn, is the bard of suburban hubbub. In one of the five paintings here, a basketball lobbed from the hand of a jovial dad in a driveway arcs through serial freeze-frames overhead. In another, a mom, her toddler, and the toddler's doll are represented many times, even though other events and persons in the painting appear just once. Schoolwerth's rambunctious families and grinning neighbors, crowded together on their lush lawns and tatty patios, evince exactly the same amount of personality as the keyed-up cell phones, sunglasses, and hedge clippers that surround them. Through Jan. 10. (Elizabeth Dee, 545 W. 20th St. 212-924-7545.)

JACK SMITH AND MARIA ANTOINETTE

This show of ephemera illuminates the relationship between the performer, artist, and writer Jack Smith (who died in 1989) and the downtown actress Maria Antoinette. In one work they're mugging for the camera on the boardwalk at Coney Island, but by the end of the show Smith's penning a letter accusing her of "treachery." In between come performance photos (his and hers), an abstract painting by Antoinette's husband, Edwin



A drawing, by Yves Tanguy, Victor Brauner, and Jacques Hérold, made in a game of exquisite corpse, in the Brauner show, at Ubu.

and second solo exhibitions were personally selected by Clement Greenberg, it cemented his reputation as a member of the color-field inner circle. A series of works from these key years—all courtesy of the artist's estate—are now on view (and on sale), offering vintage Louis in the form of saturated stains and jewel-hued swoops on raw canvas. Through Jan. 24. (Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 27th St. 212-563-4474.)

SARAH MORRIS

Nine color photos of pop subjects greet you at the entrance: plastic bottles of Diet Coke, bleachers at a speedway, a woman sunbathing by a pool. They're all nice in a ragged Richard Prince-meets-German Conceptualism way, but they don't seem to connect with the hard-edged abstract paintings hanging inside the gallery. Morris based her painted compositions on "non-rational" aspects of Miami, seen in both the photos and her short film from 2002 ("Miami,"

Ruda (Smith suggested that he add glitter to his canvases), and Smith's wonderful drawings on paper and napkins, scribbles of everything from an "Octopus in a Skirt" to a design for a "Cleaning Woman Costume." Through Dec. 23. (Albus, 511 W. 25th St. 212-242-6242.)

TERRY WINTERS

The drawings and paintings here are distinguished by two organizational principles. One set is vertical and ordered by palette: "Untitled (Violet)" has numbers and small squares like filmstrip holes emphasizing the painting's verticality. The other set of drawings and paintings, which are filled with undulating lines, grids, and webs, look like quick sketches for wire-mesh sculptures. "Turbulence Skins," forty-two charcoal drawings on slick paper, are like frenetic, smudged Uccello perspective studies. They were created for a book with Ben Marcus, author of "The Age of Wire and String," and Winters describes them as "wireframe forms." Through Dec. 20. (Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)

Short List

HOWARD HODGKIN

Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111.
Through Dec. 20.

THOMAS NOZKOWSKI

Protech, 511 W. 22nd St. 212-633-6999.
Through Dec. 20.

GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

PHILIP GUSTON / BRUCE NAUMAN / RAYMOND PETTIBON

These three artists, separated by generation, are linked by their juggling of ambiguity, humor, and threat. (The spirit of the show is best summed up by a garishly colored Nauman print of a clown

on a toilet under surveillance.) Guston's prints—most of them made the year he died—are cartoon nightmares, a mess of fists, boot soles, and nails. Cartoons recur in Pettibon's work, whose comic-book texts connect to Nauman's wordplay in works like "Suck Cuts." Through Dec. 20. (Brooke Alexander, 59 Wooster St. 212-925-4338.)

PETER RUTA

This series, painted from news photos in the four months following J.F.K.'s assassination, tracks the country's turmoil through civil-rights protests and early forays into Southeast Asia. "Dallas 1" through "Dallas 7" read like blurry newsreel stills of the assassination. "Kennedy and Nixon" depicts two stiff, faceless figures hovering against a bright-yellow ground. Ruta held this series, his sole, brief foray into Pop-inspired figural works, from public view until now. After he made them, he returned permanently to landscape painting. Through Jan. 10. (Banning, 64 N. Moore St. 212-966-4144.)

"LOOKING AWRY"

A young man and an elderly woman enter a small bedroom in Albania. After he lies down, closes his eyes, and crosses his arms on his chest, she begins a ritual wail. When the professional mourner finishes her mesmerizing song, the young man gets up, shakes her hand, and leaves the room. This achingly simple video—Adrian Paci staging his own death—is the best in this four-person show presented by a curator's collective from Zagreb. But all the work has merit: Maja Bajevic's video showcases Bosnians telling bitterly funny Bosnian jokes (like Polish jokes, but more political), while photographs by Igor Grubic (Croatia) and Aydan Murtezaoglu (Turkey) present fantasies of escape both literal and metaphysical. Through Dec. 20. (Apex, 291 Church St. 212-431-5270.)

"SUPERSTUDIO: LIFE WITHOUT OBJECTS"

This three-venue retrospective for the Italian design collective Superstudio (Adolfo Natalini,

Cristiano Toraldo de Francia, Roberto Magris, Alessandro Magris, and Piero Frassinelli) at first looks like a sober treatise on paper architecture. But the puckish, swashbuckling team, founded in 1966 and disbanded twenty years later, set out to debunk grand modernist myths, and their drawings, posters, photocollages, films, and modular objects propose a universe where salability and function are subordinate to sly impracticality and whimsical verve. For example, a "cubicle forest" in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Duomo in Florence tilted to match the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and a "Continuous Monument" wrapping around the world. All shows through Dec. 19. (Artists Space, 38 Greene St., 212-226-3970; Pratt Gallery Manhattan, 144 W. 14th St., 212-647-7778; Storefront for Art & Architecture, 97 Kenmare St., 212-431-5795.)

Short List

MILENA DOPITOYÁ

Feldman, 31 Mercer St. 212-226-3232.
Through Dec. 20.

ALEKSANDRA MIR

Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway. 212-925-2035.
Through Dec. 20.

KEITH SONNIER

Ace, 275 Hudson St. 212-255-5599.
Through Dec. 31.

GALLERIES-BROOKLYN

DANIEL ZELLER

It's easy to confuse the micro and macro—to mistake aerial photos of sprawling cities for networks of microchips or electron micrographs for satellite images of landmasses. Zeller has made himself the iconographer of this fruitful confusion. His controlled ink and pencil drawings follow a fanta-

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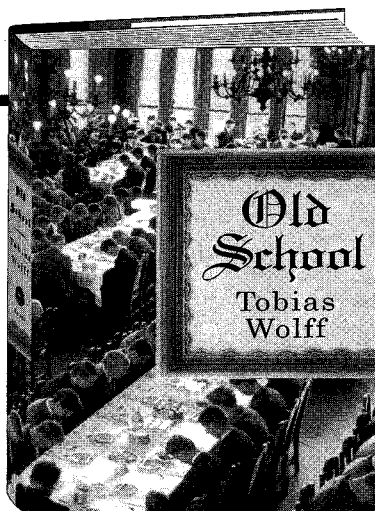
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about literature and lies

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"A deft tour de force

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profundity" —BOSTON GLOBE

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sized, composite topography of contour isobars, river courses, and node-and-bridge shapes that are all generated out of his head. But the drawings' true subject is the structure of structure itself, and Zeller imparts a vertiginous familiarity to it. Through Dec. 22. (Pierogi, 177 N. 9th St. 718-599-2144.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

ELLIOT ERWITT

A retrospective show of more than fifty years of Erwitt's trenchant and giddy images from around the world. Photographs of the segregated South, Nixon poking his finger at Khrushchev's chest, and Jackie Kennedy at J.F.K.'s funeral hang beside pictures of lovers dancing in a kitchen, little dogs standing next to their master's big feet, and a nudist on a beach, wearing dark shoes and socks. Through Jan. 3. (Leica, 670 Broadway. 212-777-3051.)

LYNN GEESAMAN

In these painterly color prints of gardens in Europe and North America, the greens in the trees' leaves seem to drip down into the grass and hedges, and flowers pop from their beds. Geesaman has an unerring eye for the geometric compositions of such famous horticultural achievements as the Parc de Sceaux, near Paris. Through Jan. 31. (Yancey Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

ROCKY SCHENK

Signs float above people's heads, and stairways swirl down from nowhere toward empty plazas in Schenk's dreamy black-and-white images. The photographs don't seem to be related to one another. A laughing woman holds a drink in what could be a stage set from a snappy thirties drawing-room comedy; a group of people stare at the sun's reflection over the sea. But shapes recur in prints that are toned to a golden perfection: winding forest paths, the arc of a waterfall's lip, a sidewalk that curves around a curved building. Through Jan. 17. (Bate-man, 560 Broadway. 212-925-7951.)

JEFFREY STURGES

Sturges's large picture "White Brick Façade (Clouds)" is just that: the upper corner of a windowless building that allows only a view of a thin stripe of trees in the distance and the cloudy blue-gray sky above. A companion piece, "Grey Sky #1, Elevated Parking," reverses the image, with an expanse of sky and trees framed by the white bricks. Entirely devoid of people, Sturges's sublime images of office parks endlessly reflected in one another and parking lots hemming in trees have more in common with Rothko's compositions than with post-Becher industrial photography. Through Dec. 30. (Art Resources Transfer, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 25th St. 212-691-5956.)

KARLHEINZ WEINBERGER

In the nineteen-fifties, Weinberger began photographing a group of Swiss teen-agers who had appropriated American pop-culture styles—the kind represented by Elvis Presley and by Marlon Brando in "The Wild One." Seen now, these pictures of boys in bluejeans with bolted crotches and girls with beehive hairdos recall Robert Mapplethorpe, John Waters, and Danny Lyon. In one particularly striking image, taken in the late sixties, a group of bikers, some of them dressed like Conan the Barbarian or, perhaps, Bam-Bam from the "Flintstones," confront a flock of sheep in an Alpine pass. Through Dec. 20. (Klagsbrun, 526 W. 26th St. 212-243-3335.)

Short List

ROBERT ADAMS

Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200. Through Dec. 20.

TINA BARNEY

Borden, 560 Broadway. 212-431-0166. Through Dec. 31.

GILLIAN WEARING

Gorney Bravin + Lee, 534 W. 26th St. 212-352-8372. Through Jan. 10.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S

The house closes the year with two sales suitable for holiday giving. Dec. 18 at 10 A.M. and 2: "Arcade" furniture and decorations, items available at moderate prices. ♦ Dec. 19 at 10 A.M. and 2: A selection of "arcade" paintings. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S

Dec. 17 at 10 A.M. and 2: If you read *Playboy* for the articles, then this sale of memorabilia—commemorating a half-century of sophisticated salaciousness—is for you. The auction includes Jack Kerouac's original typescript of "Before the Road," with corrections made in the author's hand, as well as the advance proofs of Ian Fleming's "On Her Majesty's Secret Service," with insertions and amendments by the author. Hugh Hefner, who started out as a cartoonist before going into publishing, chips in with a cartoon from *Playboy*'s first issue, two "little black books" from 1957, and his personal stretch limo. The slightly contrived sale is elegantly redeemed by the renowned lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov's rendering of the rabbit-head logo in the form of a butterfly. ♦ Dec. 17 at 10 A.M.: This sale of opulent carpets and rugs is a showcase for the diversity of production in late-nineteenth-century Persia and a provocation to home decorators everywhere. The Mohtasham Kashan carpet from Central Persia, for instance, with its modest rhombus-shaped design flanked by an unprepossessing border, is a natural for an intimate setting, but the explosive profusion of colors and motifs in the triclinal carpet from Tabriz is something no interior will accommodate without effort. ♦ Dec. 18 at 10 A.M. and 2: Printed books and manuscripts, with an emphasis on early Americana. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

SWANN

Dec. 18 at 10:30 A.M.: The elaborate ornamentation of the Art Nouveau style was well suited to the art of poster design and coincided with a boom in advertising that provided many now familiar images of theatres, home products, and Parisian café-concert stars such as Jane Avril and Yvette Guilbert—both of whom appear in Toulouse-Lautrec's publicity spread for the Montmartre nightspot Divan Japonais, a highlight of this auction of posters. German and American posters are also featured, including a highly stylized, almost Deco advertisement for the Werkbund-Ausstellung (an industrial-design exhibition held in Cologne in 1914) by Peter Behrens. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC HOLIDAY MUSIC

"MESSIAH"

Nicholas McGegan, the genial British early-music maven who heads up San Francisco's superb Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, makes his debut with the New York Philharmonic in this year's "Messiah" concerts, which feature the Westminster Symphonic Choir and an impressive group of vocal soloists: Rosemary Joshua, Alice Coote, Mark Padmore, and Gerald Finley (also making their debuts). (Riverside Church, Riverside Dr. at 120th St. 212-875-5656. Dec. 17-18 at 7:30 and Dec. 19-20 at 8.) ♦ The celebrated men-and-boys Choir of St. Thomas Church, joined by the early-music group Concert Royal, offers a solemn presentation of the oratorio amid the ambience of one of New York's grandest sacred spaces. The distinguished Gerre Hancock, in his last season as the choir's director, conducts. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. 212-664-9360. Dec. 18 at 7:30.) ♦ Every year a clutch of choruses pop up at Carnegie Hall to offer their well-rehearsed versions of Handel's "entertainment" on Christian themes. The Masterwork Chorus and Orchestra, extending its forty-nine-year tradition, is



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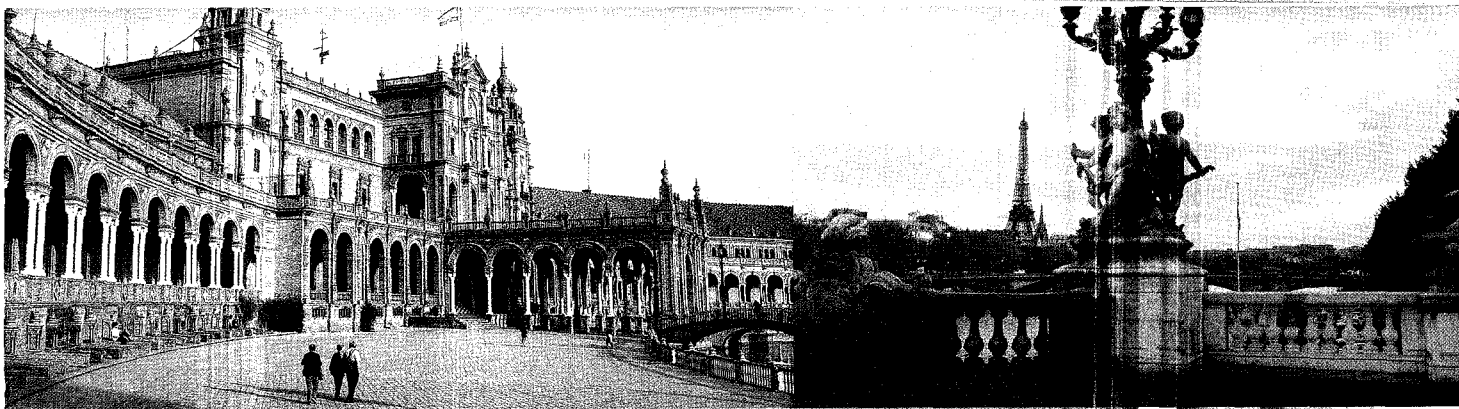
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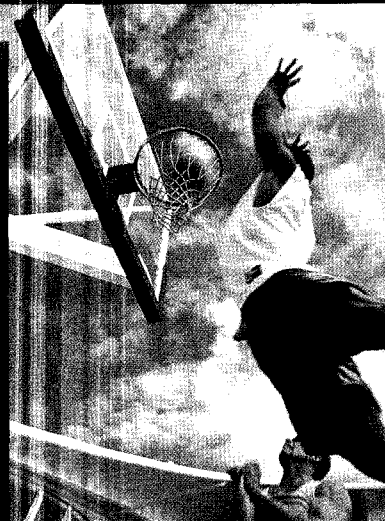
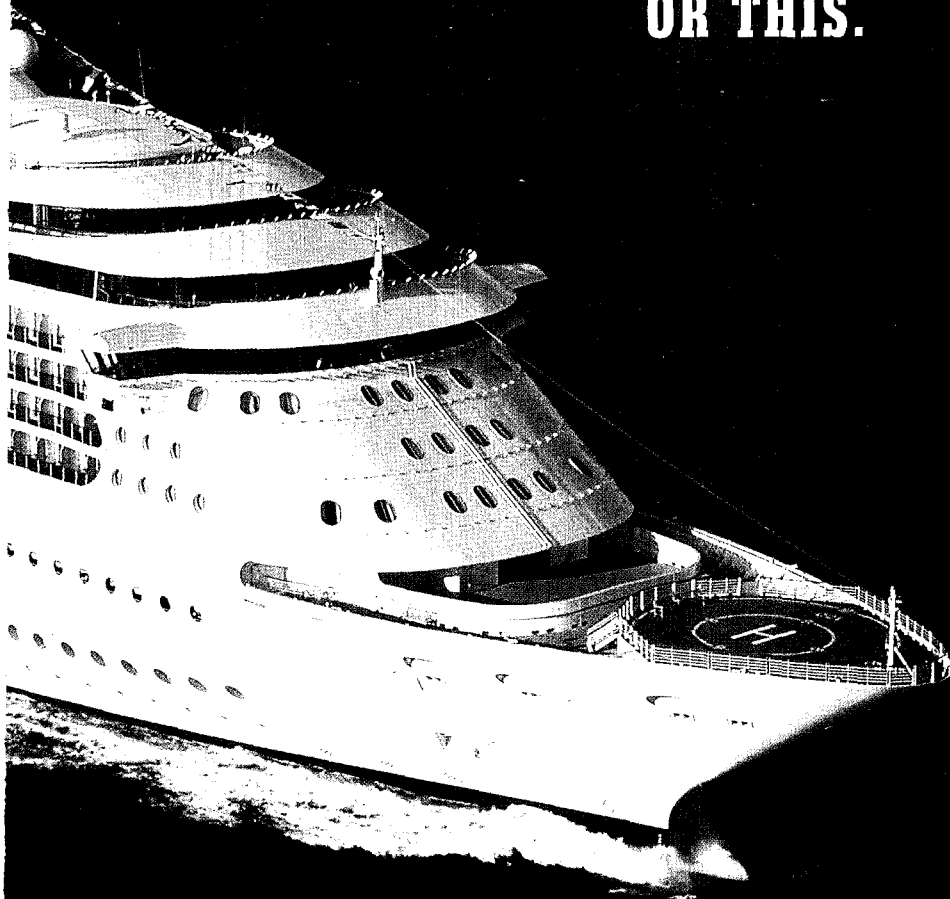
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Santorini, Greece	Valletta, Malta
Ajaccio, Corsica	

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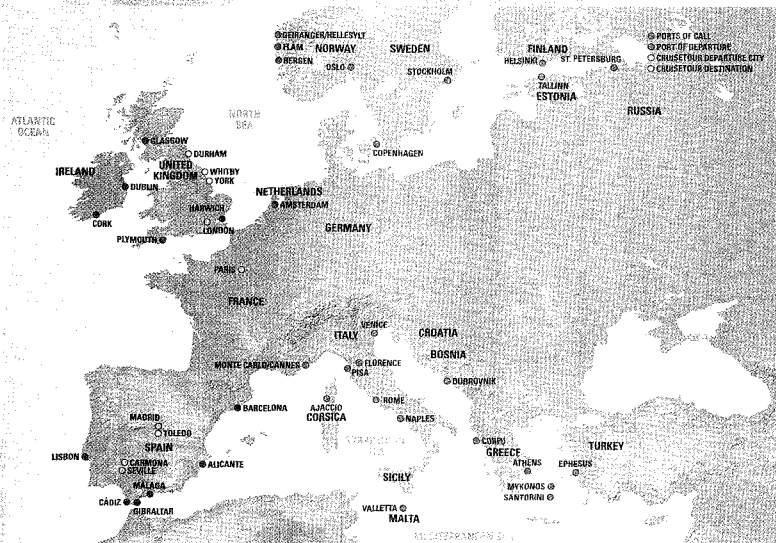
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first out of the block; Andrew Megill conducts. (Dec. 20 at 2 and 8.) ♦ Next comes Richard Westenburg's Musica Sacra Chorus and Orchestra, which traditionally offers one of the city's best renditions; the soprano Marvis Martin is among the soloists. (Dec. 21 at 8.) ♦ The venerable Oratorio Society of New York performs the piece for the hundred-and-thirtieth time, in the space that Andrew Carnegie built for them. The soloists are Sharla Nafziger, Jane Dutton, Rufus Müller, and Philip Cutlip; Lyndon Woodside conducts. (Dec. 22 at 8.) (For all Carnegie Hall performances, call 212-247-7800.)

EOS ORCHESTRA

Jonathan Sheffer, never one to follow the beaten path, leads his charges in a semi-staged, English-language version of Schütz's "Christmas Story" rescored for marimbas, trombones, keyboards, and strings, assisted by the Collegiate Chorale Singers, the tenor Peter Kazaras, and others. (Ethical Culture Society Concert Hall, 2 W. 64th St. 212-691-6415. Dec. 18 at 8.)

LIONHEART

The superb six-man vocal ensemble offers a concert celebrating the English Christmas carol in its most complex and fascinating forms, along with chants and motets from the Sarum Use and the Old Hall Manuscript. The setting is the Cloisters, the Metropolitan Museum's medieval pile in Fort Tryon Park. (212-650-2290. Dec. 21 at 1 and 3.)

EARLY MUSIC NEW YORK:

"A RENAISSANCE CHRISTMAS"

Frederick Renz's band of singers and players offers works by Dufay and Palestrina, along with music from the court of Henry VIII and a run of carols and noëls. (St. James Chapel, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 212-280-0330. Dec. 21 at 3 and Dec. 25 at 3 and 8.)

FOUR NATIONS ENSEMBLE

Songs and sonatas by Purcell and Biber, respectively, are the highlights of the longtime early-music group's Christmas concert at the Metropolitan Museum, performed amid the grandeur of the Medieval Sculpture Hall. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Dec. 21 at 6:30 and 8:30.)

THE WESTERN WIND

The vocal group, with instrumentalists, sings an interfaith holiday concert of music from medieval times to the present. The setting is ideal: the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, which have shared the same sanctuary for more than a decade. (West End Ave. at 86th St. 212-873-2848. Dec. 22 at 7:30.)

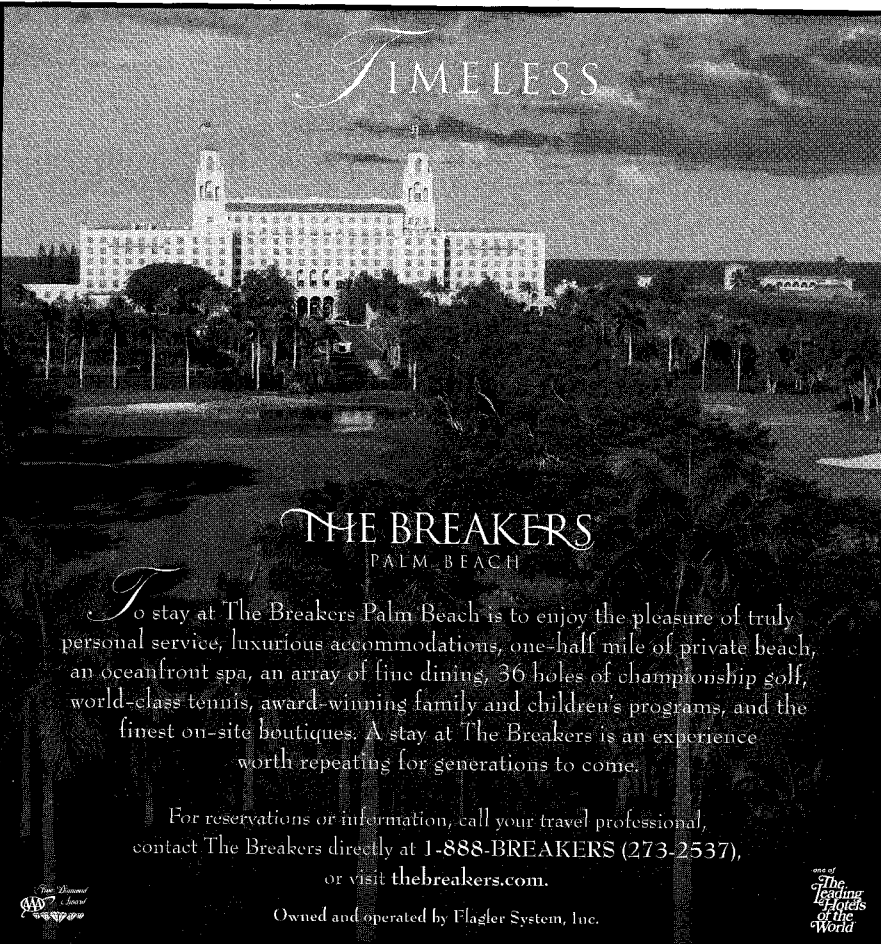
SCHÜTZ'S "CHRISTMAS STORY"

Gwendolyn Toth, the music director at the Church and Friary of St. Francis of Assisi, gathers her Artek ensemble with a host of the city's other early-music groups (including Parthenia, Piffaro, and the New York Continuo Collective) for a mass performance of Schütz's masterpiece. (135 W. 31st St. Dec. 28 at 5. No tickets required.)

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

"Il Barbiere di Siviglia" returns with a glamorous bel-canto duo, Ruth Ann Swenson and Juan Diego Flórez, leading the cast; Bruno Campanella conducts. (Dec. 17, Dec. 20, Dec. 26, and Dec. 30 at 8.) ♦ In his first opera, the endlessly revised "Benvenuto Cellini," Hector Berlioz chased the comic muse with such ardor and élan that he almost got things right. The director, Andrei Serban, fills the gaps in the composer's sometimes stodgy pacing with a very busy corps de ballet, avoiding what might have been a more appealing exploration of the opera's human passions. But his final, Brechtian flourish—an actor dressed as Berlioz swings in from the wings, proudly displaying his completed score—is a fitting touch for an opera that will always be a work in progress. The composer's strange, haunting melodies, bold rhythmic snaps, and incisive yet colorful orchestration are on won-



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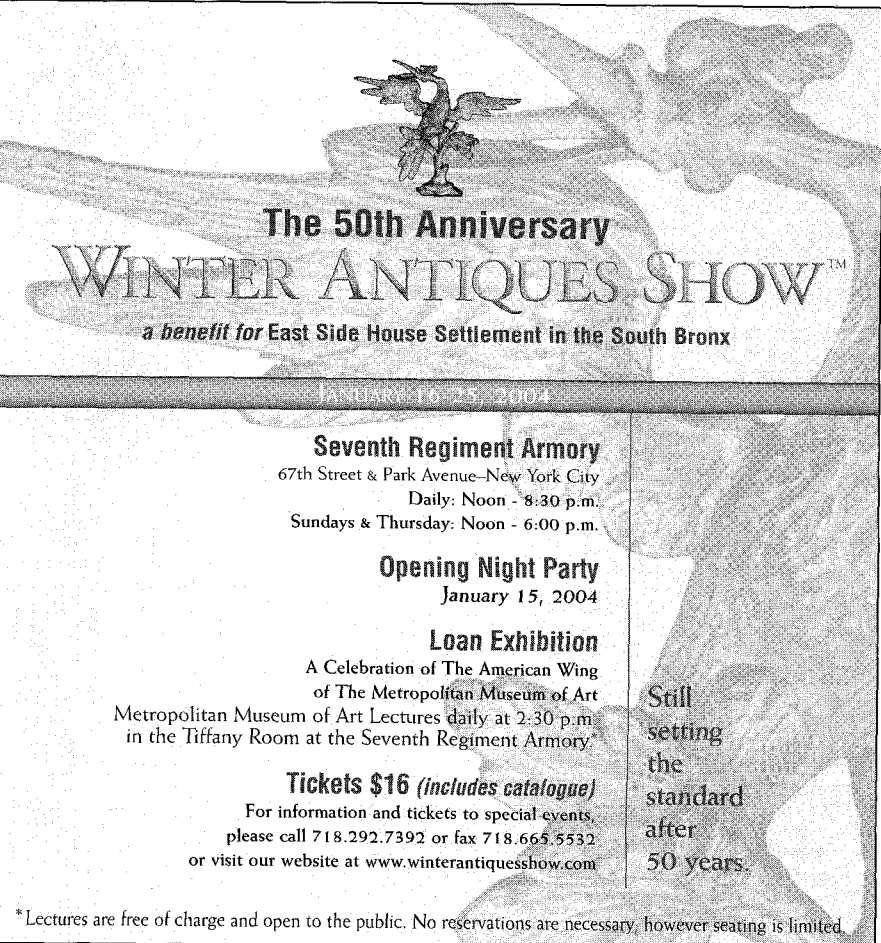
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This year's installment of the New York National Boat Show includes free scuba diving in a heated pool.

derful display, thanks to an excellent ensemble cast that includes the valiant Marcello Giordani (who scales Cellini's high C's with aplomb), Isabel Bayrakdarian, Kristine Jenson, and Robert Lloyd and to James Levine, who expertly steers his orchestra through the twists and turns of this unpredictable score. (Dec. 18 at 8, Dec. 24 at 7:30, and Dec. 27 at 1:30. Katharine Goeldner replaces Jenson on Dec. 18.) ♦ The final performance of Halévy's "La Juive," with Neil Shicoff and Soile Isokoski in the leading roles; Marcello Viotti. (Dec. 19 at 8.) ♦ "Moses und Aron," Schoenberg's dense and dramatic Biblical drama, returns with the production's impressive original leads, John Tomlinson and Philip Langridge, and its original conductor, James Levine. (Dec. 20 at 1:30 and Dec. 23 at 7:30. These are the final performances.) ♦ Susan Graham and Bo Skovhus lead the cast of this year's holiday special, "The Merry Widow"; Kirill Petrenko makes his conducting debut. (Dec. 22 at 8 and a gala performance, with surprise guest artists, on Dec. 31 at 7:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

AMATO OPERA

Anthony Amato leads his feisty East Village chamber-opera company in a holiday run of "Die Fledermaus." (319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 212-228-8200. Dec. 20 and Dec. 26-27 at 7:30, Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 2:30, and a gala performance on Dec. 31 at 7.)

DICAPÒ OPERA

An English-language version of "La Périchole," Offenbach's comic masterpiece of the Second Empire. (Dicapò Opera Theatre, 184 E. 76th St. 212-288-9438. Dec. 19-20 at 8 and Dec. 21 at 4.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

The pianist Jeffrey Kahane, who doubles as the music director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, makes his podium debut, leading the non-"Messiah" half of the orchestra in concertos by Haydn and Mozart (including the Piano Concerto in E-Flat Major, K. 482, which Kahane will conduct from the keyboard). The soloists include Robert Langevin, the orchestra's principal flutist. (Dec. 17-18 at 7:30, Dec. 19 at 2, and Dec. 20 at 8.) ♦ Renée Fleming spends New Year's Eve with the orchestra and the conductor Andrew Davis, who leads music by Debussy, Ravel ("Shéhérazade"), Offenbach, and Massenet. (Dec. 31 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

ISRAEL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Zubin Mehta, the orchestra's conductor for life, leads the group in the kind of spacious Romantic

repertory at which he excels: the Sixth Symphonies of Schubert and Mahler. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 17 at 8.)

NEW YORK STRING ORCHESTRA

Carnegie Hall's proud holiday tradition, a convocation of young virtuosos conducted by Jaime Laredo. Dec. 24 at 7: An all-Mozart program, with Leon Fleisher performing the Piano Concerto No. 12 in A Major. ♦ Dec. 28 at 2: Music by Vaughan Williams, Barber (the Violin Concerto, with Kyoko Takezawa), and Beethoven (the Eighth Symphony). (212-247-7800.)

RECITALS

CHAMBER MUSIC AT THE 92ND STREET Y

Dec. 16-17 at 8: In two concerts, a distinguished group of friends (including the violinists Jaime Laredo and Ida Kavafian and the pianist Joseph Kalichstein) gather to perform Brahms's two String Sextets in both their original versions and in the piano-trio arrangements of the composer's friend Theodor Kirchner. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

SHANGHAI STRING QUARTET

This vital and still-young ensemble, originally formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, plays with a combination of style, vigor, and intellectual energy that makes it a worthy successor to the first great Asian string quartet, the Tokyo. Their next concert is a program of three Beethoven string quartets (including the C-Sharp Minor, Op. 131) on the composer's birthday. (CUNY Graduate Center, Fifth Ave. at 34th St. Dec. 17 at 7:30. No tickets required.)

MUSIC AT MERKIN CONCERT HALL

Dec. 17 at 8: The Cosmopolitan Chamber Players (including the pianist Sandra Rivers and the cellist Mark Kosower) perform an all-Beethoven program that concludes with the Piano Trio, Op. 97 ("Archduke"). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8: Bachanalia, a chamber orchestra led by the violinist Nina Beilina, offers a festive program of Bach (the "Coffee" Cantata, BWV 211), Tchaikovsky, Ginastera, and Villa-Lobos. (129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

An intimate concert of Zemlinsky and Stravinsky (the trio version of "Histoire du Soldat") at the Rose Studio, played by the violinist Jennifer Frautschi, the clarinetist David Shifrin, and others. (Rose Building, Lincoln Center. 212-875-5788. Dec. 18 at 6:45.)

SUNDAYS ON THE ISLAND

In its last concert before a winter hiatus, City Island's inviting chamber-music series, held at Le

Refuge Inn, offers a holiday program of Bach and Mozart performed by the flutist Bart Feller, the violinist Josuke Kawasaki, and the group's director, the cellist Wolfram Koessel. (620 City Island Ave., the Bronx. 212-724-4474. Dec. 21 at 12:30. A reception follows.)

BARGEMUSIC

Olga Bloom's floating chamber-music series is a year-round affair, but its cozy space, complete with fireplace—and at intermission, a groaning board of wine and cheese—is especially inviting at holiday time. Steven Beck stands watch on Christmas Eve, performing the Goldberg Variations on the barge's Steinway grand. (Dec. 24 at 7:30.) ♦ More Bach for New Year's Eve, with the violinist Mark Peskanov joining a bunch of the city's hottest freelancers (including the flutist Susan Palma-Nidel and the cellist Edward Arron) for the Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 2, 4, and 5, among other works. (Dec. 31 at 7:30.) (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083. For a full schedule of concerts, see www.bargemusic.org.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

NEW YORK NATIONAL BOAT SHOW

The ninety-fourth display of shiny and pricey new motor cruisers, sailboats, and runabouts features all manner of nautical fun, including fishing seminars, face-painting, and free scuba diving in a twenty-six-thousand-gallon heated pool. The organizers have planned for attendees' comfort and safety—the dressing rooms will have hair dryers and towels, and expert divers will be on hand. The show is closed on New Year's Eve, which will help prevent the most troublesome symptom of drunken-sailor syndrome—excessive spending. (Jacob Javits Convention Center, Eleventh Ave. at 35th St. For more information, call 212-984-7000. Dec. 27-Jan. 4.)

READINGS

Dec. 17 at 7: The science-fiction writers Nancy Kress and Jack McDevitt read from their work. (K.G.B., 85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ Dec. 17 at 7: Carol Bergman, the editor of "Another Day in Paradise: International Humanitarian Workers Tell Their Stories," joins contributors to the recently published anthology. (Housing Works Used Book Café, 126 Crosby St. 212-334-3324.)

TALK

Dec. 18 at 6:30: The art-history professor Brandon W. Joseph discusses the work of Robert Whitman, the pioneering performance artist who is the subject of a retrospective at the Dia gallery. (548 W. 22nd St. For more information, call 212-989-5566.)

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MOVIES OPENING

THE BUTTERFLY

A drama about the friendship between a young Parisian girl and an elderly entomologist (Michel Serrault). Directed by Philippe Muyl. In French. Opening Dec. 19. (Cinema Village.)

CALENDAR GIRLS

In an English comedy directed by Nigel Cole, Helen Mirren and Julie Walters play two members of a staid women's social club who pose nude for a fund-raising calendar. Opening Dec. 19.

CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN

A remake of the 1950 comedy about two parents raising twelve children. The cast includes Steve Martin, Bonnie Hunt, Hilary Duff, Tom Welling, and Ashton Kutcher. Directed by Shawn Levy. Opening Dec. 25.

CHILDREN OF LOVE

Geoffrey Enthoven's drama considers the effects of divorce on three Belgian children. In French. Opening Dec. 24. (Film Forum.)

COLD MOUNTAIN

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 25.

THE COMPANY

Robert Altman's drama about the internal rivalries of a contemporary ballet company. With Neve Campbell, Malcolm McDowell, James Franco, and dancers from the Joffrey Ballet. Opening Dec. 25.

THE FOG OF WAR

Errol Morris directed this documentary portrait of Robert McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense. Opening Dec. 19.

THE HEBREW HAMMER

Adam Goldberg plays a Jewish superhero who tries to save Hanukkah from the evil son of Santa Claus, in a comedy written and directed by Jonathan Kesselman. Opening Dec. 19.

HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG

An adaptation of Andre Dubus III's novel about an Iranian immigrant (Ben Kingsley) in California who buys a repossessed house and gets into a dispute with its original owner (Jennifer Connelly). Directed by Vadim Perelman. Opening Dec. 19.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS:

THE RETURN OF THE KING

The final film in the J. R. R. Tolkien trilogy, with Viggo Mortensen, Orlando Bloom, Liv Tyler, Elijah Wood, and Ian McKellen. Directed by Peter Jackson. Opening Dec. 17.

MONA LISA SMILE

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 19.

PAYCHECK

John Woo directed this sci-fi thriller in which a corporate consultant (Ben Affleck) tries to recover the portions of his memory that have been erased. With Uma Thurman and Aaron Eckhart. Opening Dec. 25.

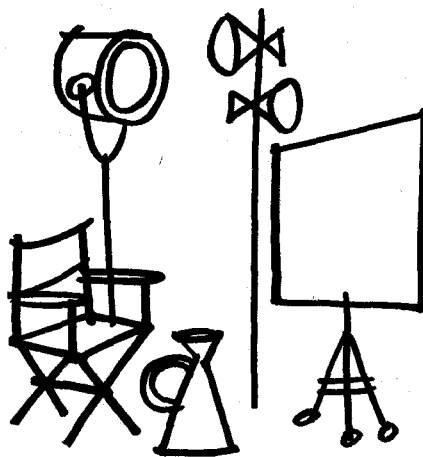
PETER PAN

Jeremy Sumpter plays the boy who never grew up, in an adaptation of the children's tale. The cast includes Jason Isaacs, Lynn Redgrave, and Ludvine Sagnier. Directed by P. J. Hogan. Opening Dec. 25.

FILM NOTES

BAD SANTA

There's something appealing about a dyspeptic comedy with an alcoholic Santa Claus (Billy Bob Thornton), a foulmouthed elf (Tony Cox), and a script that sends up the faux togetherness of the holidays, but this movie is more scatological than subversive. Terry Zwigoff, who directed "Crumb" and



"Ghost World," has a knack for finding the grotesque in modern America, and he has a terrific child actor in Brett Kelly, a butterball whose unbreakable belief in the spirit of Christmas carries the film. Yet, once the rude shock of a profane Claus wears off, there's not really much to do except await the next outrageous remark.—*Michael Agger* (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 34th Street Theatre, and Village East Cinemas.)

THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS

Rémy (Rémy Girard), the plumply boisterous philanderer of Denys Arcand's 1986 film, "The Decline of the American Empire," is now in his early fifties and dying of cancer in a Quebec hospital. His investment-banker son, Sébastien (Stéphane Rousseau)—a svelte, devastatingly efficient young man who disapproves of his reprobate father—shows up from London, arranges for Rémy's comfort as best he can, and reassembles the gang of gabby intellectuals who were Rémy's friends and colleagues in the earlier movie. The hospital room becomes the site of an ongoing party: sexual mem-

ories, bawdy jokes, political tirades, and regrets bang off the walls at all hours. Eventually, the entire group relocates to a house on the same lake that was the setting for "Decline"; as Rémy grapples with his failures and satisfactions, the movie shuts up and calms down. Arcand's film might be called an idyll of death, and the concluding scenes, in which Rémy tries to pass something on to the next generation, are intensely moving. In French.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 11/24/03.) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

BIG FISH

The title is apt enough; this movie is long, wet, and wriggling, and, after a while, you may want to hold your nose. It tells the story of Edward Bloom, played in his youth by Ewan McGregor and in the final act of his life by Albert Finney. That life is a picaresque, crammed with exaggeration and casual magic—a witch with a glass eye that shows forthcoming deaths, say, or a pair of spangled night-club singers who are also Siamese twins. This is easy stuff for somebody of Tim Burton's gifts, and you seldom feel that the new picture tests him or turns him on in the way that "Beetlejuice" or "Edward Scissorhands" did. The result is his most emotionally reactionary work to date. With Billy Crudup as Bloom's poor stooge of a son, Danny DeVito as a circus ringmaster, Matthew McGrory as a moping giant, and Jessica Lange and Alison Lohman, both badly underused, as the older and younger versions of the hero's only love.—*Anthony Lane* (12/15/03) (Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

THE DOCKS OF NEW YORK

Good, unclear fun from 1928 about a brawny coal stoker (George Bancroft) who saves a woman (Betty Compson) from suicide, marries her without a license (in a saloon), then finds himself torn between his new love and his old wandering ways. The director, Josef von Sternberg, knew how to use visual zing to fuel a seventy-four-minute movie, and if you've seen later collaborations between him and the screenwriter Jules Furthman (such as "Morocco"), you'll recognize the roots of their specialty here: characters who behave better than they think they can. Compson is terrific as a heroine who knows the time of day and wishes she didn't; her eyes are like sundials registering the come-ons of the men around her.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; Dec. 18.)

ELF
Will Ferrell with training wheels. The rambunctious comedian gives a funny, half-throttle performance as Buddy, a human raised by the elves at the North Pole. This good-spirited holiday comedy was directed by Jon Favreau, with nary a swinger or a wannabe mobster in sight. Even when Buddy comes to New York City, the movie is happy and chipper, with plenty of homages to Christmas movies past. The best scenes are a montage with Ferrell elfing around on the city streets, and his showdown with Peter Dinklage, in at least his third role as a touchy dwarf.—*M.A.* (Battery Park 16, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING
A slow, attentive movie about a painter and his model demands the kind of patience that moviegoers, especially in this hectic season, may feel reluctant to supply. But Peter Webber's reworking of Tracy Chevalier's novel is worth staying with: it casts a heavy spell as it unfolds the tale of Griet (Scarlett Johansson), a maid newly arrived in the house of Johannes Vermeer (Colin Firth). The year is 1665, and the period reconstruction, for those



Malcolm McDowell in "The Company," opening December 25.

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A Christmas Checklist of Books from Knopf



☐ **LOVE** by Toni Morrison

The "mesmerizing" new novel (San Francisco Chronicle) by the winner of the Nobel Prize.

☐ **Gabriel García Márquez** **LIVING TO TELL THE TALE**

The Nobel laureate's long awaited memoir of youth. "Magical" (New York Times).

☐ **WHERE I WAS FROM** by Joan Didion.

The book in which she turns what John Leonard has called "her sonar ear, her radar eye" on the contradictions in California's—& America's—core values.

☐ **GOYA** by Robert Hughes

A perfect match of author and subject. "Dazzling" (N.Y. Times).

☐ **Peter Carey** **MY LIFE AS A FAKE**

The new novel by the author of *True History of the Kelly Gang* is "unfailing, shamelessly entertaining" (The Times, U.K.).

☐ **Mark Salzman** **TRUE NOTEBOOKS**

The author of *Lying Awake*, who taught writing at a juvenile hall, astonishes us with his students' "true notebooks."

☐ **Tobias Wolff** **OLD SCHOOL**

From the author of *This Boy's Life*, a "complex masterpiece" (L.A. Weekly) about a New England prep school. "An acute, graceful novel" (Time).

☐ **FALLINGWATER RISING** by Franklin Toker

"A spellbinding look at Frank Lloyd Wright and the house that has become a monument to his life" (New York Times).

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who are aroused by such things, is—apart from a few modern lines of dialogue—formidably detailed. The danger with such beautifying efforts is that cinema will turn into a branch of taxidermy, and what keeps Webber's movie alive is the tenseness of the setup (will this girl stay in the artist's household, and, if so, will she become his lover or his muse?), and, above all, the presence of Johansson. She is often wordless and close to plain onscreen, but wait for the ardor with which she can summon a closeup and bloom under its gaze; this is her film, not Vermeer's, all the way.—A.L. (12/15/03) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

IN AMERICA

The tale of an Irish family that travels to New York in search of a better life, or, at any rate, a life. Johnny (Paddy Considine), his wife, Sarah (Samantha Morton), and their daughters, Christy (Sarah Bolger) and Ariel (Emma Bolger), settle near Hell's Kitchen and wrestle, as you would expect, with outlandish local customs such as air-conditioners and Halloween. Despite the title, the director, Jim Sheridan, is gripped less by the country in which his characters find themselves than by their own hope and anguish: there was a third child, a boy, who died before they came to the States. The movie has a busy intensity but lacks the rooted confidence of Sheridan's Irish work, as seen in "My Left Foot" and "In the Name of the Father." What ties it down, if anything, is the performance of Sarah Bolger—ten years old when the picture was made, but the sanest and saddest person on the block.—A.L. (12/1/03) (Beekman, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Union Square.)

THE LAST SAMURAI

Tom Cruise is Nathan Algren, a disillusioned Civil War hero, who goes to Japan in 1876 and trains the Emperor's army in modern warfare. In their first encounter with the great samurai Lord Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe), the gun-toting soldiers are overwhelmed and Algren is carted off to Katsumoto's mountain retreat, where the two warriors have dignified conversations about loyalty and cherry blossoms and other profound Japanese things. Redeemed by discipline and honor, Algren trains as a samurai and, in the end, fights alongside the great man. The director, Edward Zwick, attempting to revive the stately manner of sixties epics, has made a very earnest piece of work—handsome, methodical, pious, and rather doggedly literal. The training sequences are fun (Cruise gets knocked on his ass again and again), and the big battles are thrilling. Yet the naive association of virtue with feudalism and the scene of Algren kneeling before the Emperor induce a certain amount of queasiness. With the beautiful ex-model Koyuki as Taka, the widow who takes care of Algren. From a story by John Logan, who worked with Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz on the stiff-jointed screenplay.—D.D. (12/8/03) (Battery Park 16, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, Village Theatre VII, and Ziegfeld.)

MASTER AND COMMANDER:

THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

Finally, the work of Patrick O'Brian arrives onscreen. Two of his twenty Jack Aubrey novels have been requisitioned for this new Peter Weir film; instead of receiving a gentle introduction, we are launched straight into a fogbound firefight, and from there into a race around Cape Horn. The casting of Russell Crowe as Aubrey will divide the fans; he can handle the sway of action with aplomb, but O'Brian readers may flinch at his sullen air and pine for the bluntness of the original. Paul Bettany does a delicate job with the role of Stephen Maturin, Jack's best and cleverest friend; we sense his quiet eagerness—common to the work of Weir and O'Brian—to press on toward the darker reaches of the world and discover more. For all the foul weather, and despite the charming amputation scene, we feel ourselves to be in good company with these men, and strangely jealous of their packed and salted lives.—A.L. (11/17/03) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Metro Twin, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS

As pretty and inviting as a candy sampler, with some bittersweet morsels inside. The director, Vincente

Minnelli, puts his sophisticated style and vibrant performers at the service of a simple Midwestern fable with the message "There's no place like home." The blooming Judy Garland ("I have too much bloom," she quips) and the feisty young Margaret O'Brien are the liveliest of Leon Ames's four daughters; under their influence, Ames, a lawyer, decides to stay in the cozy Gateway City of 1903 rather than accept a promotion to his firm's New York office. With the help of an able cast (Mary Astor, Harry Davenport, Lucille Bremer, and Joan Carroll), Minnelli brings out the romance of domesticity. No one else has captured the joyful horror of a child's Halloween—or, for that matter, any pre-teen rite of passage—as expertly as he does in O'Brien's trick-or-treat sequence. The four Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane tunes include "The Trolley Song" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Irving Brecher and Fred F. Finkelhoff wrote the script, based on Sally Benson's stories for this magazine. Originally released in 1944.—M.S. (Moving Image; Dec. 27-28.)

THE MISSING

Ron Howard gets down and dirty with a skillfully directed but rather sadistic Western about a vicious Apache *brujo* (Eric Schweig), or witch, who hangs rattlers in the trees, throws vile colored powders into people's mouths and eyes, and captures young white virgins whom he then sells as slaves to laughing Mexicans. No such trade existed in New Mexico in 1885, but Howard deals in such authentic trials as bullets removed from flesh and teeth pulling. Cate Blanchett is the tough frontier woman whose daughter (Evan Rachel Wood) is kidnapped by the Apaches, and Tommy Lee Jones plays Blanchett's muttering reprobate of a father, who long ago "went Injun" and understands their savage ways. The movie might be seen as a degraded version of the 1956 John Ford classic, "The Searchers."—D.D. (12/8/03) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

MODERN TIMES

After "City Lights," which was silent, with a musical accompaniment and sound effects, Charlie Chaplin was absent from the screen for five years; he returned in triumph with this rambunctious 1936 comedy in which he still doesn't speak, although he uses background sounds and, as a singing waiter in a crowded cabaret, he does a wonderful jabberwocky patter song that you can't get out of your head. Influenced by René Clair's "À Nous la Liberté," Chaplin opens the film with a satire on the dehumanizing effects of technology (the machines speak—they whirl and pound and screech), but Chaplin is far more basic and sadistic than Clair. The picture is about the social disorders of the thirties, and there are clashes between the unemployed and the police, and a gag about a Communist demonstration, yet it's one of the happiest and most light-hearted of the Chaplin pictures—partly because his new leading lady, Paulette Goddard, playing a character listed as "a Gamin," has a beautiful grin and a bouncy, outgoing personality. With Henry Bergman as the café proprietor, Chester Conklin as the mechanic, and Hank Mann as one of the burglars.—Pauline Kael (Film Forum; starting Dec. 26.)

MY ARCHITECT

A traditional quest, superbly told. Nathaniel Kahn seeks to understand the life of his father, the architect Louis I. Kahn; his task is made even more difficult by the fact that Kahn had three separate and coexisting families: a wife and two mistresses with one child apiece. For his part, Nathaniel was an illegitimate son and only eleven when his father died; his interviews are laced with raw, uncut feeling for a man he never really knew. Throughout the documentary, he uses Kahn's buildings (beautifully photographed) as a kind of wedge into his father's motivations and personality. He discovers that Kahn's more famous contemporaries, like I. M. Pei, appear haunted by his career: is it better to have designed three or four unexamplified buildings, as Kahn did, or to have had a successful, high-profile architectural practice? Perhaps more surprising, the women in Kahn's life don't regret the way he treated them. Anne Tyng, Kahn's co-worker and mistress, explains her affection this way: "The ideas that you work on together connect you always somehow."

Starfish days, starlit nights.
Only seven years old, I was the Belle of the Beach.
I dreamed of returning as one
of the ladies in big round sunglasses.
Here I am.




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In the end, Nathaniel's homage to his father demonstrates what it was like to be caught in his creative whirlwind.—M.A. (Film Forum.)

MYSTIC RIVER

Clint Eastwood's sombre masterpiece, from a novel by Dennis Lehane (Brian Helgeland did the adaptation), is about a working-class Catholic community in Boston held in thrall by an old crime. Back in the seventies, one of three eleven-year-old boys who were close friends was taken away by two men pretending to be cops and sexually assaulted for days before he finally escaped. But it turns out that Dave (Tim Robbins) never escaped at all. Twenty-five years later, he is still shrouded in dreams and terror, and his two friends, Sean (Kevin Bacon), a homicide detective, and Jimmy (Sean Penn), an ex-con who runs a corner grocery, still feel the shame of not helping him. When Jimmy's nineteen-year-old daughter is murdered, the three are uneasily brought back together again. The movie's feeling for the neighborhood milieu is so convincing because there's no distinction between background and foreground—everything we see (faces, living rooms, back yards, weather, battered old cars) is dramatically relevant. Eastwood directs in a gray, end-of-day light and with a minimum of camera rhetoric; he lets the script and the actors do the work. Penn does a few semi-psychotic soliloquies in which he takes off into the stratosphere, joining Marlon Brando as one of the great tragic actors of the screen.—D.D. (10/13/03) (Battery Park 16, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, 64th and 2nd, Sutton 1 and 2, and Village Theatre VII.)

SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Metro Twin, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE

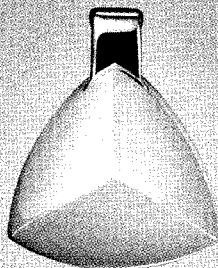
A boy is given a bicycle. He grows up to compete, under the tutelage of his ferocious grandmother, in the Tour de France, only to be kidnapped and smuggled overseas. The old lady, with a panting hound in tow, tracks and retrieves the unfortunate cyclist, aided by three crones who feast on a casserole of murdered frogs. Such is the gritty, fantastic plot of Sylvain Chomet's animated film, which could only have emerged from a culture in which the worship of comic books approaches the status of an organized religion. Indeed, there is much to revere in Chomet's swollen caricatures and vertiginous angles, although agnostics may be tempted to point out that a little elastic surrealism goes a long way, and that to learn the exact details of somebody else's dreams—which is what this movie feels like—can be at once haunting and tiresome. In French, just about, though most of it is noise, and no subtitles are required.—A.L. (12/1/03) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

21 GRAMS

Impassioned and affecting as some of it is, this desperately sincere drama of life and death in Nowheresville, U.S.A., is also an arrogant failure. Benicio Del Toro, dolorously made up with clown circles under his eyes, plays the Jesus-freak ex-con who accidentally runs down a man and his two little girls. Sean Penn, some sort of math professor with a bad ticker, gets the heart of the dead man, at which point he begins to follow around the grieving widow (Naomi Watts). Written by Guillermo Arriaga and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, the same team responsible for the powerful "Amores Perros," the picture moves every which way but straight ahead. The intent of the scrambled syntax, one imagines, is to show how three sensitive and damaged people might encroach upon one another's lives, even infiltrate one another's unconscious, a process that works independently of time. But we don't know where we are in the story or why a given action should matter. The jagged pieces of the mosaic keep dropping off the wall and falling to the floor with a clatter. Yet the three stars act the hell out of their tormented roles, and, at times, they are amazing to watch.—D.D. (11/24/03) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.)

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PIECES OF APRIL

Cinema Village, 84th Street Sixplex, and 62nd & Broadway.

THE STATEMENT

Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Sunshine Cinema.

THE STATION AGENT (10/6/03)

Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Sutton 1 and 2.

STUCK ON YOU

Chelsea West, East 85th Street, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 212-777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.

Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.

Battery Park 16, West St. at Vesey St.

Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.

Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.

Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.

Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.

Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (212-924-3363).

East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.

84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.

Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
(212-398-3939).

59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.

First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.

42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.

Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.

Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.

(212-757-2280).

Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.

New York Twin, Second Ave. at 66th St.

19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.

Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.

Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (212-688-3800).

Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.

72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.

64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.

62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.

Sunshine Cinema, 139-143 E. Houston St.

Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.

34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.

Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.

Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.

Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.

Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—

Through Jan. 4: "Judy Garland's Classic Films."

Dec. 20 and Dec. 29 at 2: "Babes in Arms" (1939,

Busby Berkeley). ♦ Dec. 20 at 4, Dec. 21 at 4:30, and

Dec. 26 at 2: "The Wizard of Oz" (1939, Victor

Fleming). ♦ Dec. 21 and Dec. 30 at 2: "Strike Up the

Band" (1940, Berkeley). ♦ Dec. 27-28 at 2: "Meet

Me in St. Louis" (†). ♦ Dec. 27 at 4:30: "For Me and

My Gal" (1942, Berkeley). ♦ Dec. 28 at 4:30: "The

Clock" (1945, Vincente Minnelli). ♦ Repertory nights.

Dec. 19 at 7:30 and Dec. 20-21 at 6:30: "Phantom of

Liberty" (1974, Luis Buñuel; in French). ♦ Dec. 26 at

7:30 and Dec. 27-28 at 6:30: "Kagemusha" (1980,

Akira Kurosawa; in Japanese).

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5110)—

Dec. 17-18 at 8: "Brothers and Others" (2002,

Nicolas Rossier). ♦ Dec. 17 at 8:30: "Dead

Guys" (2003, Alex Dove). ♦ Dec. 18-21: "A



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Picture Rarely Seen," a centenary celebration of Joseph Cornell. The programs include rare shorts from the artist's private collection and his own movies. ♦ Special screening. Dec. 19-20 at 8: "Jonas at the Ocean" (2001, Peter Sempel).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-777-3456)—Dec. 17 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "War Takes" (2002, Patricia Castaño and Adelaida Trujillo; in Spanish). ♦ Dec. 18 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "The Outskirts" (1989, Pyotr Lutsik; in Russian). ♦ Bollywood movies. All films are in Hindi. Dec. 19 at 2, 5, and 8: "War and Peace" (2002, Anand Patwardhan). ♦ Dec. 20 at 2 and 7: "Devdas" (2001, Sanjay Leela Bhansali). ♦ Dec. 21 at 3 and 7: "The Legend of Bhagat Singh" (2002, Rajkumar Santoshi). ♦ "Have an Alternative Xmas." Dec. 22 at 7: A selection of experimental Christmas shorts. ♦ Dec. 23 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Christmas in July" (1940). ♦ Repertory favorites. Dec. 24 at 2, 5, and 8: "The Hidden Fortress" (1957, Akira Kurosawa; in Japanese).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through Dec. 25: A Josef von Sternberg

tors. Dec. 18 at 2: "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (2003, Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain). ♦ Dec. 18 at 4: "The Wild East—Portrait of an Urban Nomad" (2002, Michael Haslund-Christensen). ♦ Dec. 18 at 6: "War Takes" (2002, Patricia Castaño and Adelaida Trujillo; in Spanish). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8: "Three Tales" (2002, Steve Reich and Beryl Korot). ♦ Dec. 19 at 6:30: "Traces: The Kabul Museum 1988" (2003, Tsuchimoto Noriaki; in Japanese). ♦ Dec. 19 at 8:30: "Missing Allen" (2001, Christian Bauer). ♦ Dec. 20 at 5:30: "Neighbors of the Kremlin" (2002, Christiane Buechner; in German and Russian). ♦ Dec. 20 at 7:45: "New York Profile: Joe Chaikin's Life in the Theatre" (2003, Dee Henoch). ♦ Dec. 20 at 9:15: "Flag Wars" (2003, Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras). ♦ Dec. 21 at 1: Three films by Amar Kanwar. ♦ Through Feb. 29: "The Hidden God: Film and Faith." Dec. 19 and Dec. 28 at 2: "Winter Light" (1963, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish). ♦ Dec. 20 at 1 and Dec. 22 at 6: "The Flowers of St. Francis" (1950, Roberto Rossellini; in Italian). ♦ Dec. 21 at 3:30: "Crimes and Misdemeanors" (1989, Woody Allen). ♦ Dec. 26 at 4:30: "Groundhog Day" (1993, Harold Ramis). ♦ Dec. 27 at 7: "Love Affair" (1939, Leo

SUNSHINE CINEMA

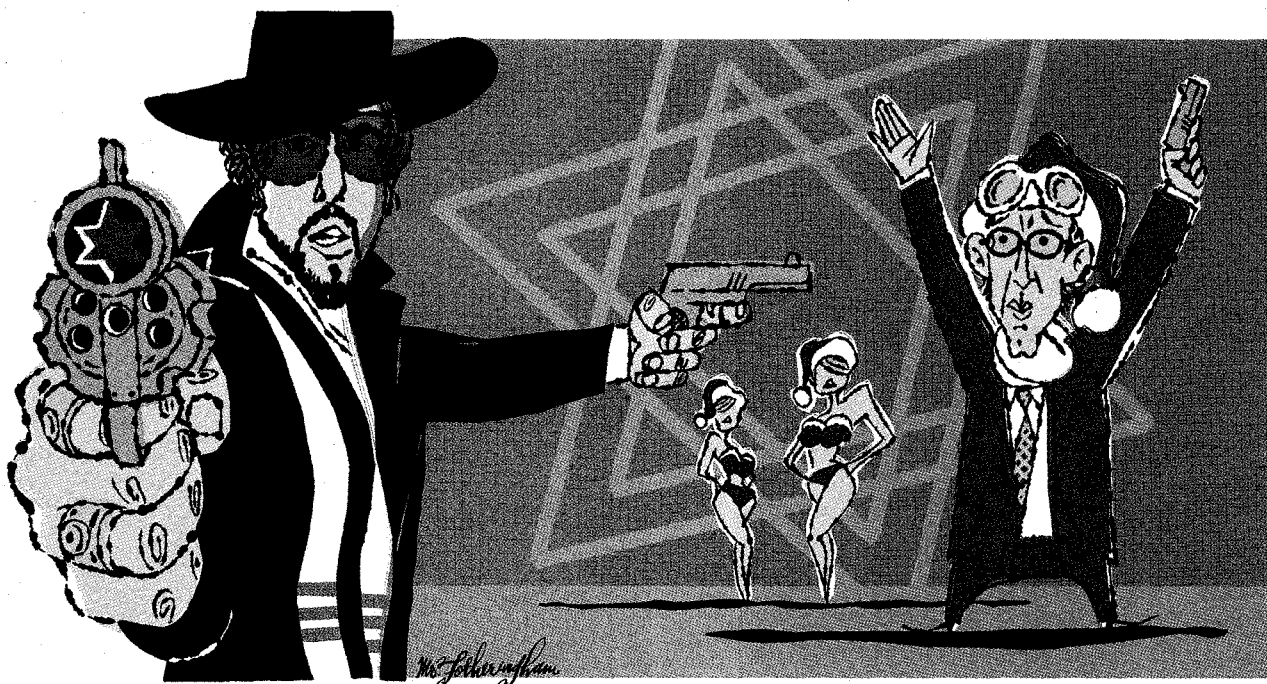
139-143 E. Houston St. (212-358-0573)—Midnight movies. Dec. 19-20: "Better Off Dead" (1985, Savage Steve Holland). ♦ Dec. 26-27: "Edward Scissorhands" (1990, Tim Burton).

THALIA THEATRE

Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—An Akira Kurosawa retrospective. All films are in Japanese. Dec. 20 at 2 and Dec. 21 at 5:30: "The Lower Depths" (1957). ♦ Dec. 20 at 4:15 and Dec. 21 at 7:45: "Throne of Blood" (1957). ♦ Dec. 20 at 7 and Dec. 21 at 2: "Ran" (1985). ♦ Dec. 27 at 2 and Dec. 28 at 6:30: "Rashomon" (1950). ♦ Dec. 27 at 3:45 and Dec. 28 at 8:15: "Sanjuro" (1962). ♦ Dec. 27 at 6:30 and Dec. 28 at 2: "Seven Samurai" (1954).

WALTER READE THEATRE

Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through Dec. 24: "Spanish Cinema Now." All films are in Spanish. Dec. 17 at 1 and 7: "Carlos Against the World" (2002, Chiqui Carabante). ♦ Dec. 17 at 3 and 8:50: "Nobody's Life" (2002, Eduard Cortés). ♦ Dec. 17 at 5: Spanish Civil War films. ♦ Dec. 18 at 1, Dec. 20 at 7:15, and Dec. 21 at 8:10: "The Hours of the Day"



Opening December 19, "The Hebrew Hammer," a holiday comedy with Adam Goldberg and Andy Dick.

retrospective. Dec. 17 at 1, 4:30, and 8: "The Last Command" (1928). ♦ Dec. 17 at 2:40, 6:10, and 9:40: "Dishonored" (1931). ♦ Dec. 18 at 2, 5:30, and 9: "Morocco" (1930). ♦ Dec. 18 at 3:50 and 7:20: "The Docks of New York" (†). ♦ Dec. 19-20 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "Blonde Venus" (1932). ♦ Dec. 21 at 1, 3:10, 5:20, 7:30, and 9:40: "The Scarlet Empress" (1934). ♦ Dec. 22 at 1, 4:30, and 8: "Crime and Punishment" (1935). ♦ Dec. 22 at 2:40, 6:10, and 9:45: "An American Tragedy" (1931). ♦ Dec. 23 at 1:50, 5:30, and 9:10: "Macao" (1952). ♦ Dec. 23 at 3:30 and 7:10: "The Shanghai Gesture" (1941). ♦ Dec. 24-25 at 1, 4:35, and 8:10: "The Epic That Never Was" (1965). ♦ Dec. 24-25 at 2:30, 6:05, and 9:40: "The Blue Angel" (1929). ♦ Starting Dec. 26 at 1:20, 3:20, 5:20, 7:20, and 9:20: A restored print of "Modern Times" (†).

FLORENCE GOULD HALL

55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through Dec. 23: "Petits Bijoux," underappreciated French films. Dec. 23 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Jean Renoir's Directions to Actors" (1968, Jean Renoir; in French) and "Jean Renoir the Boss" (1966, Jacques Rivette; in French).

GRAMERCY THEATRE

127 E. 23rd St. (212-777-4900)—Through Dec. 21: "Documentary Fortnight 2003," recent nonfiction films, many of which will be introduced by the direc-

McCarey). ♦ Dec. 29 at 1: "Unforgiven" (1992, Clint Eastwood). ♦ Dec. 29 at 5:30: "Babette's Feast" (1987, Gabriel Axel; in Danish and French). ♦ Through Jan. 22: "Das Neue Kino," German films. Dec. 19 at 4 and Dec. 27 at 9: "In a Year of 13 Moons" (1978, Rainer Werner Fassbinder). ♦ Dec. 20 at 2:45 and Dec. 28 at 6: "Nowhere in Africa" (2001, Caroline Link). ♦ Dec. 21 at 6: "The Himmler Project" (2000, Romuald Karmakar). ♦ "Happy Birthday, Joseph Cornell," a centenary celebration. Dec. 22 at 8 and Dec. 26 at 2: Cornell's short film "Flushing Meadows" (1965) and shorts from his collection. ♦ Starting Dec. 26: A Victor Sjöström retrospective. Most films are silent and some have Swedish intertitles, which will be translated simultaneously. Dec. 26 at 6:30 and Dec. 28 at 4: "The Gardener" (1912) and "Ingeborg Holm" (1913). ♦ Dec. 26 at 8:30 and Dec. 29 at 3:30: "The Sons of Ingmar" (1918). ♦ Dec. 27 at 1: "Karin, Daughter of Ingmar" (1920). ♦ Dec. 27 at 3: "The Phantom Carriage" (1920). ♦ Dec. 27 at 5 and Dec. 29 at 7:30: "The Sea Vultures" (1916) and "Kiss of Death" (1916).

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

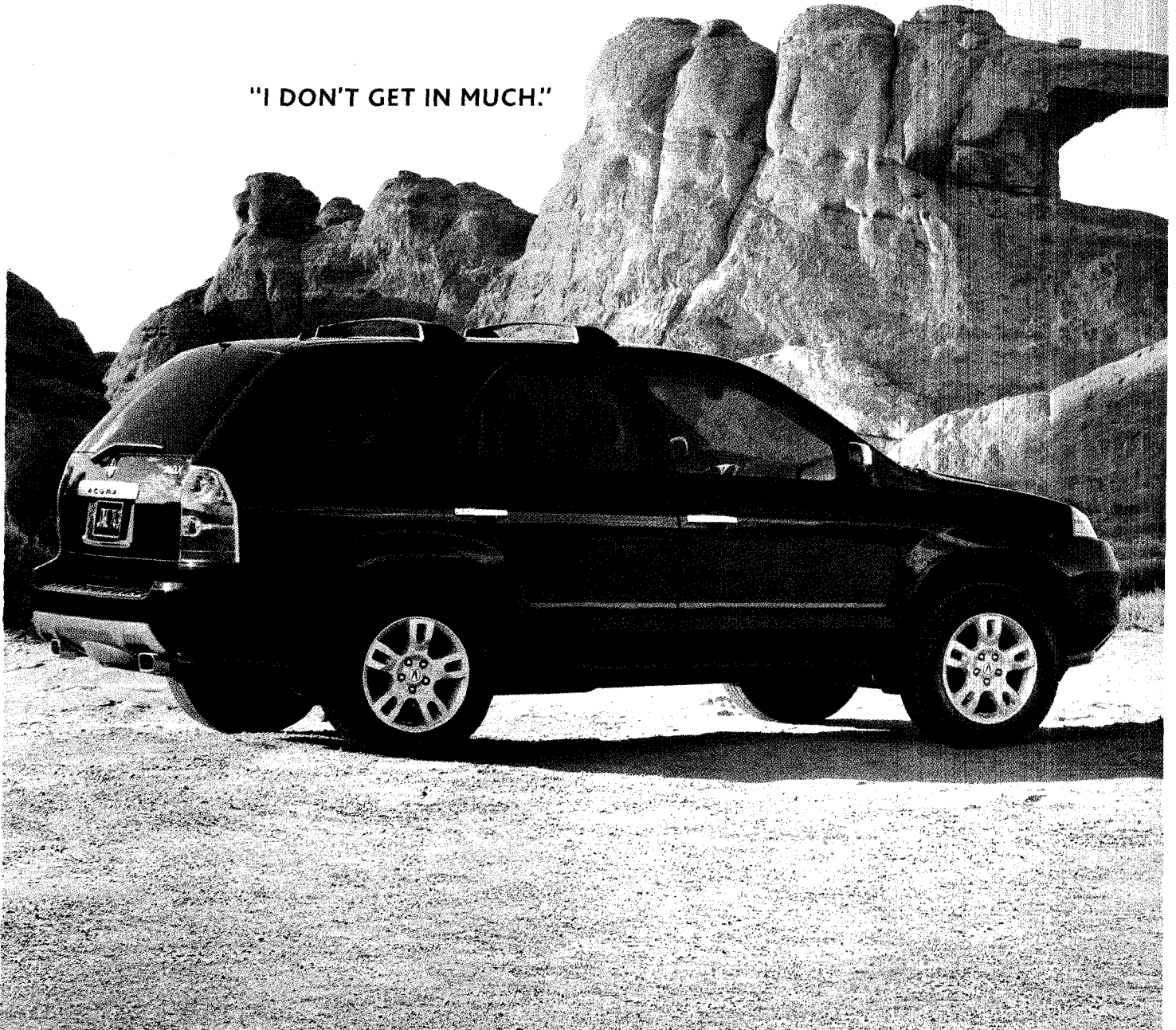
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—Through Jan. 14: A Federico Fellini retrospective. All films are in Italian. Dec. 17 at 7: "Fellini: A Director's Notebook" (1969). ♦ Dec. 20 at 3: "Amarcord" (1973). ♦ Dec. 19-20 at 7: "Orchestra Rehearsal" (1979).

(2003, Jaime Rosales). ♦ Dec. 18 at 3 and Dec. 21 at 3:30: "The Carpenter's Pencil" (2003, Anton Reixa). ♦ Dec. 19 at 1:30 and 6:15, Dec. 20 at 9:20, and Dec. 22 at 9:15: "Carmen" (2003, Vicente Aranda). ♦ Dec. 19 at 4 and 8:40 and Dec. 20 at 5: "The Suit" (2002, Alberto Rodriguez). ♦ Dec. 21 at 1:30 and Dec. 22 at 1 and 5:15: "La Bodega" (1930, Benito Perojo). ♦ Dec. 21 at 5:45 and Dec. 24 at 2 and 6:30: "Where Is Madame Catherine?" (2003, Marc Recha). ♦ Dec. 22 at 3 and 7:10 and Dec. 24 at 4:15: "Elena Dimitrievna Diakonova" (2003, Silvia Munt). ♦ Starting Dec. 26: Science-fiction films. Dec. 26 at 1 and 5, Dec. 27 at 3:10, and Dec. 28 at 1: "Escape from New York" (1981, John Carpenter). ♦ Dec. 26 at 3 and 7 and Dec. 27 at 9:30: "A Boy and His Dog" (1975, L. Q. Jones). ♦ Dec. 26 at 9 and Dec. 27 at 1 and 7:15: "The Year of the Sex Olympics" (1968, Michael Elliott). ♦ Dec. 27 at 5:15, Dec. 29 at 4:30, and Dec. 30 at 1: "Demon Seed" (1977, Donald Cammell). ♦ Dec. 28 at 3 and Dec. 29 at 6:30: "World on a Wire" (1973, Rainer Werner Fassbinder; in German). ♦ Dec. 29 at 2 and Dec. 30 at 3 and 7:10: "The Fury" (1978, Brian De Palma). ♦ Dec. 30 at 5:15 and 9:30: "Quatermass and the Pit" (1967, Roy Ward Baker). ♦ Special event: "Hollywood Horror," screenings in honor of Mark Viera's new book. Dec. 28 at 7:15: "The Seventh Victim" (1943, Val Lewton). ♦ Dec. 28 at 9: "The Uninvited" (1944, Lewis Allen).

EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

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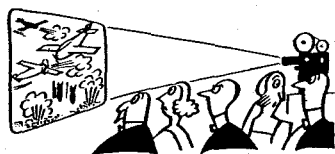
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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT WINNING AND LOSING



One day late last summer, as the tally of bombings, shootings, and acts of sabotage against the American occupation in Iraq took on the unmistakable profile of a war of guerrilla insurgency, the office of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, at the Pentagon, designed and distributed e-mail flyers with a cautionary headline: "HOW TO WIN A BATTLE AGAINST TERRORISM AND LOSE THE WAR OF IDEAS." The e-mail invited those involved in the "WOT"—the war on terrorism—to a private screening of the Italian Marxist director Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 masterpiece, "The Battle of Algiers." The movie, which will be rereleased in theatres next month, is surely the most harrowing, and realistic, political epic ever filmed. It depicts the conflict between Algerian nationalist insurgents and French colonial forces in the late nineteen-fifties, or, as the flyer put it: "Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar?"

For all the differences between

France's fight to keep Algeria—a country it had occupied since 1830—and America's current dispensation in Iraq, the parallels between the drama of insurgency and counter-insurgency in "The Battle of Algiers" and our present Iraqi predicament are as clear and as depressing as the Pentagon film programmers promised. The ugly truth that Pontecorvo lays vividly bare, as his camera tacks back and forth between the Algerian guerrillas and the French paratroopers, is that terrorism works. For, although the film focusses on a chapter in the Algerian struggle when France succeeded in crushing the rebel movement, the final moments of the movie show how within a few years the French were forced to accept defeat and retreat,

an outcome that in retrospect appears historically inevitable.

Such is the bind that the Bush Administration has led us into in Iraq. Appalling, intolerable—in all senses, maddening—as the terrorist tactics of the Iraqi insurgents may be, their truck bombs, donkey-cart missile launchers, and sniper rifles are tactical political instruments that have steadily and systematically succeeded in isolating American forces in Iraq. They have effectively driven the United Nations, the international staff of the Red Cross, and other aid groups from the country, and—more disastrously—they have fostered a mutual sense of alienation between the American forces and the Iraqi people they are supposed to be liberating.

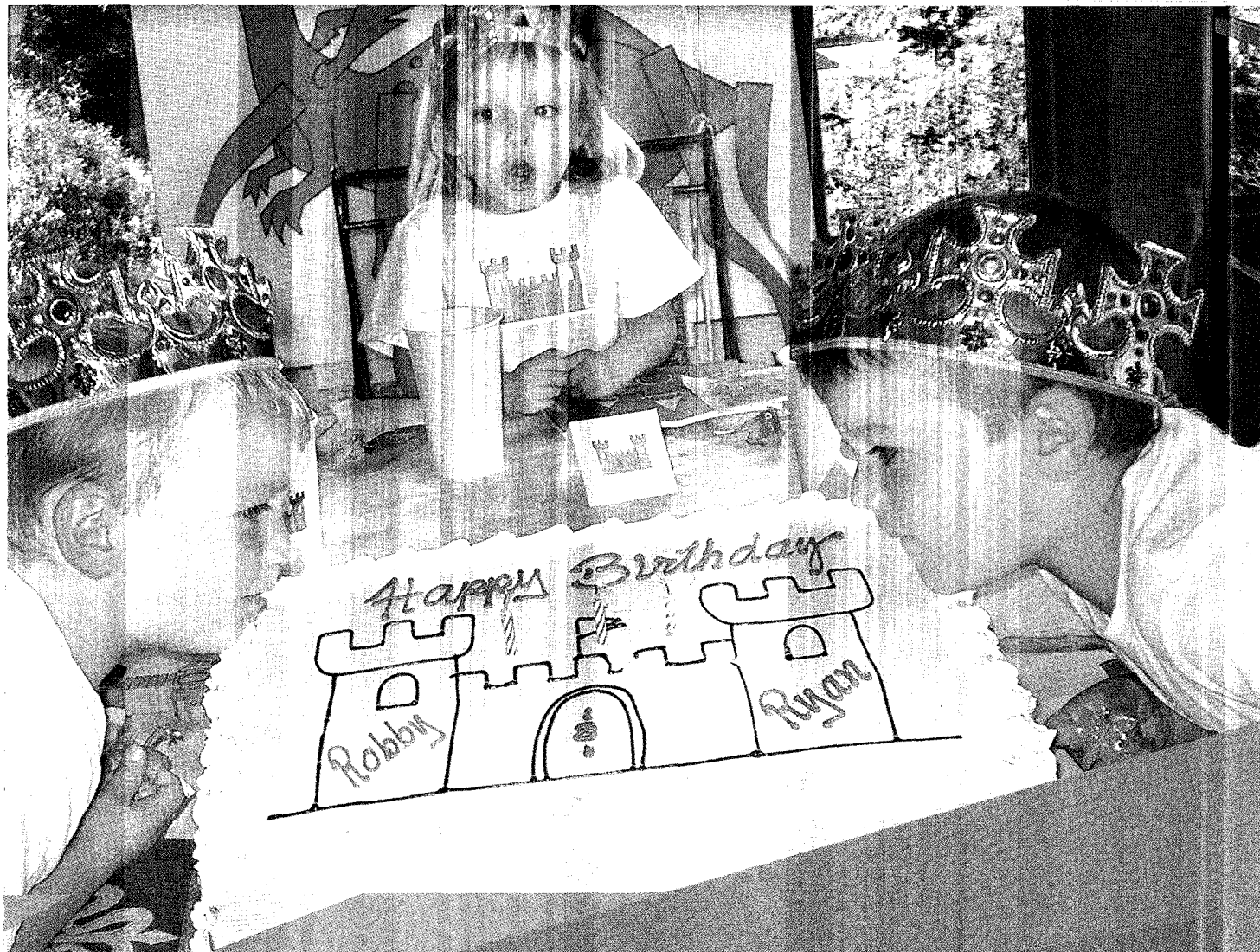
Triumphalist pronouncements from Washington notwithstanding, our occupying forces are now clearly on the defensive. And the more aggressive their defense becomes, the more it serves the insurgents' purposes. When an American adviser in Iraq speaks of a new strategy of "terrorism versus terrorism," as Seymour M. Hersh reported in these pages last week, and an American lieutenant colonel tells the *Times*, "With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them," one may be forgiven for concluding that the enemy is





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[illegible]



YOU

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MADE THE CAKE.

MADE THEIR DAY ONE TO REMEMBER.



defining the terms of the fight to his advantage.

In "The Battle of Algiers," there comes a moment when the commander of the French paratroopers, Lieutenant Colonel Mathieu, realizes that, despite a spate of strategic successes against the insurgency, he is losing the larger battle for public opinion. At a press conference, reporters confront him with allegations that his men have tortured Algerian informants. Mathieu reminds the reporters that the press had originally been unanimous in calling for the suppression of the rebellion. "That's why we were sent here," he says. "And we're neither crazy nor sadistic. . . . We are soldiers. Our duty is to win. Since we're being precise, I'll now ask you a question. Is France to remain in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, you must accept all the necessary consequences."

President Bush has consistently assured us that America will "stay the course" in Iraq, but what he means by that—what that course is—is not clear. Just as the official reasons for the war keep shifting, so does the Administration's proclaimed objective. For now, we are in Iraq because the President and his most influential advisers wanted to go to war there. Having made a misleading case for the war, the Bush team drastically mismanaged the crucial early period of the occupation, and has recently responded to the Iraqi insurgency by scrapping its original plan for political revitalization in favor of a hastier schedule of "Iraqization." With Bush's attention turning ever more urgently to holding on to the White House in next year's election, he is pushing for the election of an Iraqi transitional government by the middle of next year. "We're going to get out of there as quickly as we can, but not before we finish the mission at hand," Andrew Card, the White House chief of staff, explained the other day.

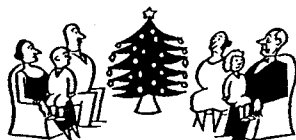
Unlike the French mission in Algeria, Washington's goal in Iraq is not to prevent the people from governing their own country but to help them to do so. Presumably, the insurgents—about whose politics, allegiances, organization, and objectives shockingly little is known—also want to see Iraqis in power, if not the same ones that Washington might favor. The question "Is America to remain in Iraq?" would ultimately

receive the same negative answer from the occupiers as from the guerrillas. But, as the Bush Administration pushes for speedy elections and a speedy exit, Algeria's example is again worth bearing in mind. In the early nineties, an Islamic fundamentalist party won elections in that country by a solid majority but was prevented from taking power by the secular military, which refused to accept the democratic election of an anti-democratic government. As a result, the country descended into a civil war that is reported to have claimed a hundred thousand lives.

Right now, there is no Iraqi state and, in the absence of an Iraqi leader, President Bush holds power. Of course, Iraqis won't get to vote for him when they do eventually go to the polls, and for that, at least, he can be grateful. His apparent impatience to get out of the country suggests that he recognizes how difficult it will be to maintain the claim that he is that country's liberator even as he serves as Commander-in-Chief of an increasingly relentless counter-insurgency campaign. The President cannot afford to lose Iraq. What is less obvious, with the guerrillas setting the agenda, is what the price would be to win it.

—Philip Gourevitch

PERILS SURVIVOR: HOLIDAY EDITION



The holiday season can be dangerous. People speak of it in terms of endurance and survival—oh, the gridlock, the fruitcake, the crazy great-aunt!—but there are real perils, too. The burning Christmas turkey, for example. A turkey that is left in the oven too long can burst into flames and, if not properly dealt with, burn down the house. One really should have a turkey-fire plan.

A thing you learn at Christmas is that there is a book for everything. The one for coping with holiday catastrophes is "The Book of Survival: The Original Guide to Staying Alive in the City, the Suburbs & the Wild Lands Beyond," by a British mountaineer and former

Outward Bound instructor named Anthony Greenbank. It was published in 1967, before the authors of the "Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook," the best-seller that reinvigorated the survival racket, were even born, and for a spell it had Greenbank on the talk-show circuit, advising Dick Cavett on how to deal with a menacing drunk (slam a four-pint beer can down on your own finger to create a distraction, then flee) and Steve Allen on what to do in a submerged automobile (turn on the lights). A revised edition of the guide, taking into account the hazards of a post-9/11 world, was issued last month. The book is arranged by category, with chapter headings such as "Too Wet," "Too Cold," and "Too High," and is intended to be read straight through, but, should the reader need a relevant refresher, the index is thorough and threat-specific: "Clothing catches fire, when," "Coconuts, reaching," "Cougars." The index listing "Turkey fire, holiday" leads to the following recommended course of action:

1. Upon opening the oven door and discovering the worst, slam door.
2. Switch off gas/electricity.
3. Turn exhaust to full power.
4. Shroud head in wet towel and wear sunglasses/eyeglasses/goggles (to save eyes) when you next take a peep 15 minutes later.
5. If still burning call fire service.

If not still burning, you are by no means in the clear. Another section, under the heading "Beware Turkeys" (in the "Too Lonely" chapter), states, "Christmas turkey could be bad for your back, according to experts in naturopathy and osteopathy." Removing a twenty-pound bird from the oven is equivalent to lifting two bags of cement. The Greenbank way:

1. Keep the turkey close to your body, lowering yourself on one knee, keeping the knees apart to keep the load close to you and using your leg muscles to help lift.
2. Before you actually lift, actively set your back muscles, then raise your head, tuck your chin and stomach in and slowly straighten up.

Greenbank generally advocates calm in the face of holiday danger. His unconventional burning-Christmas-tree strategy calls for unplugging the tree lights and smothering the flames with a rug (Greenbank has never seen a Christmas tree burn—standard firefighting procedure calls for vacating the house and calling the fire department). Then, there

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is the dreaded holly-berry-ingestion situation: "If a child doubles up with violent stomach pains and starts vomiting, suspect the worst. Take him straight to the nearest hospital. If only a few berries have been swallowed and there is no hospital nearby, make him drink lots of water or milk after calling the doctor."

The book says nothing, however, about surviving drunken family political arguments, should they turn hostile. This could be a bad year. On the phone last week from his home in the Lake District, Greenbank considered the scenario, then said evenly, "My advice would be to count to ten. And then if things do get heated, if people come to blows, try to intervene. These things do happen in slow motion. If someone threw a drink in your face in a bar, that would be a prelude to your getting head-butted—that probably isn't going to happen over the family table. But if you were going to be head-butted or punched, do you know what to do?"

No.

"O.K., so if a guy throws a drink in your face, and then he head-butts you, you hang on and grip him very close until your eyes clear, because your eyes are going to sting like hell. Then just hang on. The fact that you're hanging on to him might then get other people to intervene. Things do happen in families at Christmas. Violence. Certainly in England, when there's drink involved."

—Nick Paumgarten

THE BENCH SILLY OLD BEAR V. MOUSE



It's not entirely clear how the Winnie the Pooh lawsuit became a modern epic. The facts of the case seem straightforward. In 1930, a literary agent named Stephen Slesinger acquired the merchandising rights to the Pooh story from A. A. Milne, who created the inhabitants of the Hundred Acre Wood to entertain his real-life son, Christopher

Robin Milne. In 1961, Shirley Slesinger, Stephen's widow, signed those rights over to the Walt Disney company in return for four per cent of the revenues that Disney received from Pooh merchandise. Thirty years later, the Slesinger family sued Disney for breach of contract, claiming that the company had stinted on the royalties. Now, twelve



Pooh Bear and Johnnie Cochran

years into the litigation, the case is said to be the oldest one on file in Los Angeles Superior Court, and it has recently earned another dubious distinction, as a kind of postscript to the O. J. Simpson case.

Dozens of lawyers have worked on the Pooh case, but there are now two main antagonists. Three years ago, Disney hired Daniel M. Petrocelli, who is best known for having represented the family of Ronald Goldman in a wrongful-death civil lawsuit against Simpson. (The jury in that case found Simpson liable for the murder of the former Brentwood waiter, and ordered him to pay damages of \$33.5 million, which he has not done.) A few weeks ago, Petrocelli got a new adversary, when the Slesinger family replaced its former counsel with Johnnie Cochran, who led Simpson's successful defense in the criminal case against him. "The question in this case," Cochran said the other day, "is 'Does the Mouse keep its word?'"

Obviously, there are many other

questions, starting with how a breach-of-contract matter grew into a Beverly Hills "Bleak House." One unresolved issue is whether the contract covers home videos, which barely existed when it was signed. But most of the delays seem to be the result of lawyers fighting with each other. At one point, early in the case, a second judge was appointed just to handle arguments about the discovery process. Another time, Disney was sanctioned by a judge for disposing of the files of a company executive who negotiated a 1983 revision of the original contract with the Slesingers.

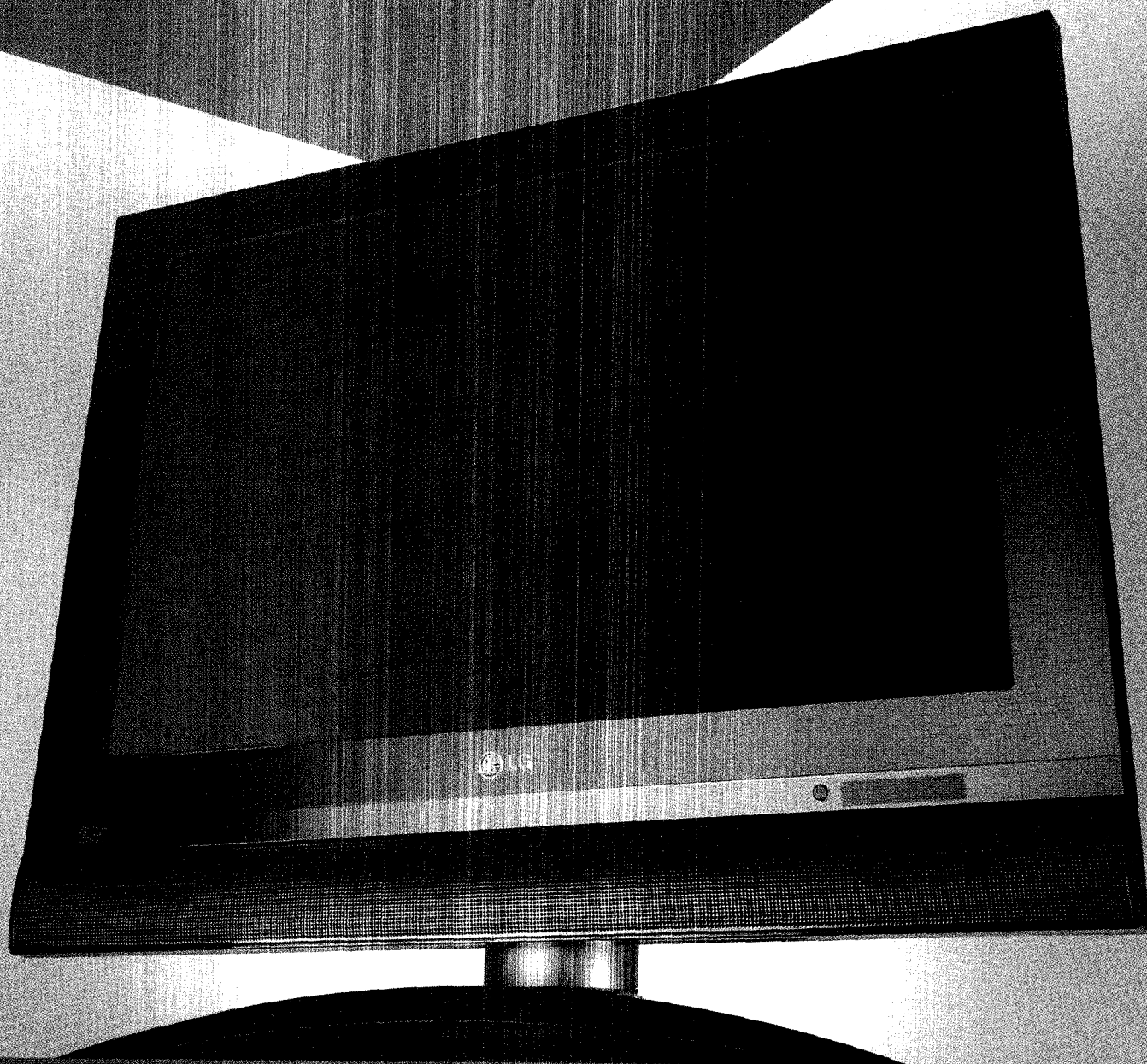
The latest turn has Disney accusing the Slesinger team of misconduct for, among other things, rummaging through the company's garbage. After first dismissing the charge—"I don't like ketchup on my exhibits," one lawyer scoffed—the Slesingers' attorneys conceded that they did take documents from what they called a "publicly accessible" trash container. "There's been a massive coverup here, and egregious misbehavior," Petrocelli said. "And we're going to a full hearing about what they did, with witnesses, on January 20th." The judge hasn't set a trial date for the case itself.

That's Cochran's first goal. "We need to get all this stuff out of the way about who went through what trash," he said. "This is a case that should go to trial, and that's what I'm going to do." The stakes for Disney are enormous. The company earns about a billion dollars a year in Pooh-related revenues, and if the Slesingers win the case Disney estimates that it may be liable for several hundred million dollars.

Petrocelli and Cochran, both of whom live in Los Angeles, had never met until recently, despite their mutual involvement in the Simpson case. Just before their first skirmish in the Pooh matter, they bumped into each other at the NBC studios in Burbank. "It was about four-thirty in the morning, and we were both doing the 'Today' show," Cochran said. "I was going out, and he was coming in." Both men had been booked on the show to talk about Michael Jackson.

—Jeffrey Toobin

IS STYLICIOUS A WORD?

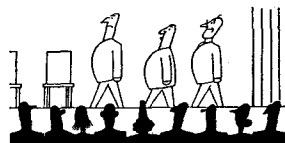


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THE STUMP DEAN WAY UPTOWN



In the minutes before Howard Dean was to be formally endorsed by Al Gore, last week, at the National Black Theatre, on 125th Street, a representative of the Dean campaign asked members of the media to please keep to the sides in order to make room for paying guests. (Officially, the event was a fund-raising breakfast: a hundred and twenty-five bucks for o.j. and croissants.) "We've got a whole mess of supporters coming in," the staffer explained. It seemed a reasonable expectation, given the vocal backing that Dean has enjoyed in New York.

While a Dizzy Gillespie track played in the background, those already assembled in the third-floor ballroom—older folks, mostly; City Hall types and local business leaders—reminisced about the primary campaign as though it had just concluded.

"His patient was Vermont," one man said of Dr. Dean. "Now his patient is the United States." Phase 2 of the Dean campaign was about to begin.

Perhaps owing to the time of day (it was just after 8 A.M.) or the location (above Fourteenth Street), the usual Dean throngs—the young, Web-savvy hipsters we have come to recognize as the candidate's devoted base—did not show. City Councilman Bill Perkins, whose district includes central Harlem, eventually mounted the stage to begin the festivities. "Ladies and gentlemen, you're in the Mecca of what we like to believe is the African diaspora, the home of the world-champion Harlem Little League," Perkins said, flanked by Yoruban wooden statues.

Perkins had himself endorsed Dean a week earlier, thereby setting himself apart from Congressman Charles Rangel, of Harlem, an early supporter of Wesley Clark. He now identified some of Dean's locally relevant (if lesser-known) policy points: "He understands that lead poisoning also is among the concerns that we have in an urban community, understands that we have a serious problem with respect to asthma and diabetes." Then, as Dean emerged from stage left, followed by Al Gore, to the tune of a country song by LeAnn Rimes, Perkins asked for "a Harlem round of applause." He commended the champion Little Leaguers again—the team's co-

founder, Dwight Raiford, was in the audience—and presented Dean with a celebratory Little League cap.

"It's great to be back in Harlem," Gore said, after a brief introduction from Dean. He turned to face Perkins, and said, "We shot basketball together one of the last times I was here." He stated his endorsement plainly, and then returned to the language of athletics. "Democracy is a team sport," he said. "Here we are in Harlem. We need to keep our eyes on the prize."

Dean had since removed the baseball cap. "I think it's important that we started in Harlem," he said. He explained that in 2002 the Democrats had neglected their loyal base. "I think it's important in this campaign that we recognize those people who were with us all the time," he said. He was referring not to the Dean campaign, and its young, mostly white, activists, but to the Democratic Party: Phase 2. "And so we made a conscious decision to start with women, to start with the African-American community, to start with the Latino community," he continued. "I am proud to be here in the capital of the African-American community in this country."

The audience members soon filtered out to claim their Continental breakfast. Councilman Perkins hung back by the stage, talked briefly with an executive from Motown Records, and then reflected on the morning's significance. "This is a momentous occasion for not only Harlem, the community, but, I think, for all the Harlems of the country," he said. Dizzy Gillespie was playing again. "He's saying, 'You can be assured that I've heard you've been dissed, but you can be assured that you will not be dissed with me.'"

Congressman Rangel wasn't impressed, particularly by Al Gore's appearance in his neighborhood. "This guy was really born and raised in a hotel room in the segregated, racist city of Washington, D.C.," he said. "You know, I jokingly said he told a cabby to take him to Harvard and they dropped him off in Harlem." Rangel had just arranged a Harlem endorsement party of his own—for Clark—featuring two City Council members, a state senator, and an assemblyman. Still, he said, "I don't really think the people of Harlem are focussed on anything that relates to the candidates."

—Ben McGrath

NOBITUARY

An obituary on this page yesterday erroneously reported the death of Katharine Sergava, a dancer and an actress who portrayed the dream-ballet version of Laurey, the heroine, in the original production of "Oklahoma!"

—The Times.

Randall Bernstein, who for decades worked tirelessly on behalf of many charitable organizations in New York, died at his home on Tuesday night but went on to help the Knicks defeat the Orlando Magic Wednesday night at Madison Square Garden. Mr. Bernstein was, and is, eighty-seven.

Friends and admirers sent flowers to Mr. Bernstein's Upper East Side home on Wednesday, little suspecting that the philanthropist was busy racking up thirty-four points in the Knicks' 102-75 thrashing of the Magic.

"He sure didn't play like a dead guy," Knicks coach Don Chaney told reporters

after the game. Savoring the victory in the Knicks' locker room, Mr. Bernstein revealed the secret of his stunning offensive performance: "When you're dead, you've really got something extra to prove out there."

Mr. Bernstein, who led the Knicks in a pregame moment of silence for the late Brad Pitt, wore down Orlando with four three-pointers and twelve assists, both N.B.A. records for a dead player.

Death is no stranger to Mr. Bernstein, whose first obituary appeared in the *Times* in 1962. In the years following his first death, he gave generously to many charitable causes, including a fund dedicated to preserving erroneous dates on New York's many memorial plaques. Mr. Bernstein is survived by his wife, Selma, who died in a skiing accident in 1974.

—Andy Borowitz

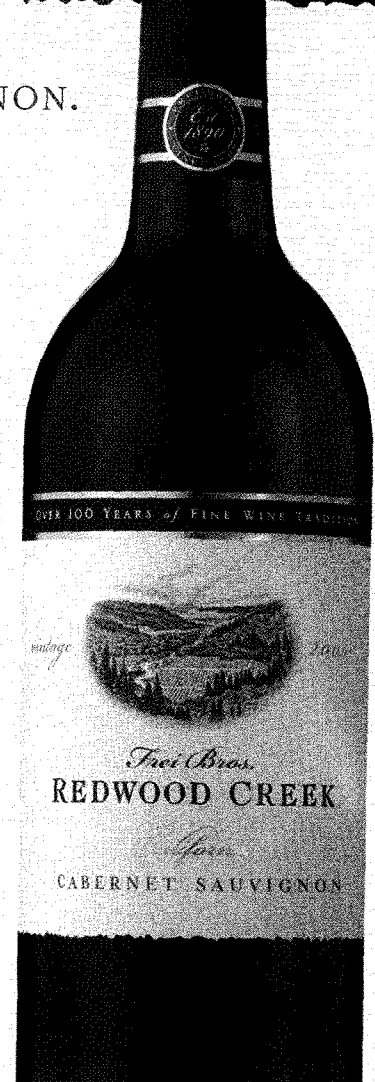
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THE FINANCIAL PAGE GOING DUTCH

On January 17, 1956, the Ford Motor Company did what Henry Ford never wanted it to do: it went public. In the most highly anticipated initial public offering in history, investors shelled out more than six hundred million dollars for 10.2 million shares. The I.P.O. was more than a business transaction. It was a cultural event, the embodiment of what the New York Stock Exchange called "people's capitalism." Ford insisted on reserving roughly eighty per cent of the shares for individual investors—as opposed to big institutions—and when the market opened the company suddenly had three hundred and fifty thousand new owners.

Half a century later, another iconic company, the Internet search engine Google, is on the verge of going public, and the hype surrounding its I.P.O. has, if anything, surpassed that which preceded Ford's. Stock-market pundits predict that the offering could give Google a market value between fifteen and twenty-five billion dollars and resuscitate the I.P.O. market, and the real dreamers believe that it could return the entire technology sector to the "Daddy's rich and Mama's good-looking" days of the late nineties. Google's I.P.O. might indeed transform things—just not, as the dreamers hope, in Silicon Valley. What it really could change is Wall Street.

It's an open secret that the current I.P.O. system is broken. As things stand, when a company goes public the investment bank that is underwriting the offering effectively sets the price of the I.P.O., after canvassing big investors to find out how much they're willing to pay. Then it determines who gets to buy shares. In theory, the system is reasonable enough. In practice, it is deeply flawed, because it creates a conflict of interest between the investment bank and the company. The company wants to get the highest price possible for its stock so that it can raise as much money as possible. The bank has other priorities. It has personal relationships with institutional investors it wants to keep happy. It has clients to reward. If it keeps the offering

price down, it can use the I.P.O. shares to curry favor and drum up new business. In the late nineties, for instance, institutional investors channelled trading through the investment banks that let them in on hot I.P.O.s. A recent New York Stock Exchange/N.A.S.D. report concluded that underwriters "had at times engaged in misconduct contrary to the best interests of investors and our markets; at least some of this misconduct was unlawful."

The victims of all the chicanery were the companies that went public. In 1999 and 2000, they saw their share prices jump by an average of sixty-five per cent on the first day of trading. Those gains went to the lucky investors who got



cheap shares, rather than to the companies that were trying to raise money. The finance professors Jay Ritter and Ivo Welch have calculated that in those years new companies raised sixty-six billion dollars less than they would have if the stocks had been priced correctly.

The stock-exchange report suggests tinkering with the system: new regulations, more hoops. But, with so much money at stake, it might be time to take a run at fixing the thing, rather than patching it up with duct tape. The basic problem with the I.P.O. process is that investment banks act as intermediaries between companies and investors. So one solution would seem to be to cut out the middlemen.

That, as it happens, is what Google is

contemplating. To be sure, the company has made the rounds on Wall Street and auditioned the usual investment banks. But it is also considering a different approach. Instead of hiring an investment bank, Google would effectively let the market set its share price. The process, which is often called a Dutch auction, is simple. Investors submit bids over the Internet telling the company how many shares they want and at what price. The company then calculates a price at which it can sell all its shares and raise the most money. Investors who bid that price or higher get shares, while those who bid lower do not. The virtue of this system is that no one is rewarded for personal connections—no kickbacks, no quid pro quo. And the company knows that it's not being shortchanged: the price is that which the market is willing to pay.

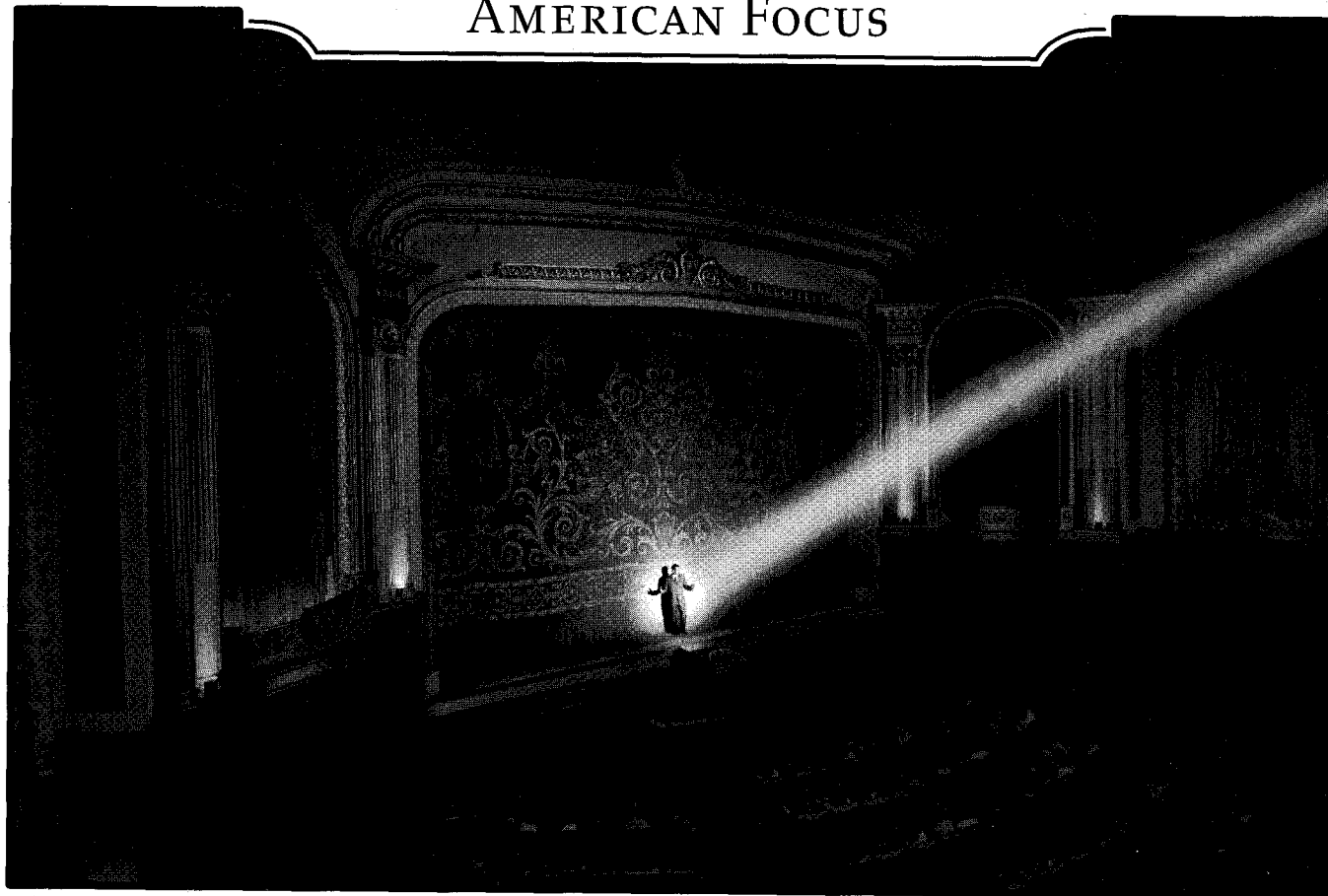
A version of this system has been devised by the boutique investment bank W. R. Hambrecht but has been slow to catch on; only a handful of companies have tried it. New companies are wary of challenging Wall Street. Without the legitimacy conferred on them by an investment bank, they worry that big investors will ignore them. They can't resist going with the devil they know.

Google, though, has nothing to fear. It doesn't need Wall Street to gin up investor interest or to protect its share price. It has the heft and the prestige to buck the system. What's more, its approach to business happens to suit the Dutch-auction model. Google became the dominant player in the search-engine market by going directly to the people. When you use Google to find information on the Web, it doesn't ask a cadre of experts where the information is likely to be. Instead, it turns to the Internet as a whole, essentially asking millions of Web pages to vote. The process is analogous to the new-model I.P.O.: forget the experts; go with the crowd. You might say that Google could Google its own stock price.

In the end, the company may very well decide that going Dutch is too risky, and choose instead to go public the old-fashioned way. But it has already rewritten the rules for one industry. Why not have a go at another?

—James Surowiecki

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LETTER FROM SPAIN

LOOKING FOR LORCA

A country begins to disinter its painful past.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

On August 18, 1936—or perhaps it was August 19th, no one is quite sure—Federico García Lorca was taken from the cell where he was being held, in Granada, and driven into the hills northeast of the city. He may have spent the night, or just a few hours—again, there are conflicting accounts—at a children's summer camp called La Colonia, which,

death," it has been said that he asked for a priest. (According to this account, he was told that none was available.) He may have been tortured: one of his killers reportedly boasted afterward about having "fired two bullets into his ass for being a queer." However, like so many other rumors about Lorca's final moments, this one has never been substantiated.

own death, including the details of his interment. Salvador Dalí, a close friend and, probably, love interest, recalled how Lorca, as a student in Madrid, used to act out his burial, describing the position of the corpse, the closing of the coffin, and the bumpy passage of the funeral procession over the cobbled streets. "In this game, the process of putrefaction lasted five days," the painter remembered. "Poet in New York," which Lorca wrote during a yearlong stay in the United States and Cuba, in 1929–30, contains at least a half dozen first-person allusions to an assassination, including this one, from "Fable of Three Friends to Be Sung in Rounds":

When the pure shapes sank
under the chirping of daisies,
I knew they had murdered me.



Federico García Lorca in 1934. In Spain, he once observed, a dead person "is more alive than anywhere else in the world."

in the early days of the Spanish Civil War, had been converted into a way station for the condemned; or, alternatively, it is possible that he was held in a parked car. In the hours before his execution, Lorca either smoked and talked despairingly with his cellmates or sat silently between the armed men who were guarding him, and when he realized that he was being taken on a *paseo*, or "walk of

At the time of his slaying, Lorca was thirty-eight. With the publication of "Gypsy Ballads," composed while he was still in his twenties, he had become, almost instantly, Spain's most famous poet, and the phenomenal success of his Andalusian tragedies "Blood Wedding" and "Yerma" had made him the country's most celebrated dramatist as well. From early childhood, Lorca had been obsessed with his

Lorca's celebrity outside Spain was also considerable. "Blood Wedding" had been a hit in Buenos Aires, and Lorca, visiting the city to promote the play, had charmed Pablo Neruda and infuriated Jorge Luis Borges. His American friends included the *Times* reporter Mildred Adams and the editor and critic Herschel Brickell, who once called him "the nearest thing to a pure genius" that he had ever

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encountered. Inquiries into Lorca's disappearance began almost immediately. In October, H. G. Wells, then the president of the London PEN Club, sent a telegram to the military governor in Granada requesting news of his "distinguished colleague." However, as much as it was possible to maintain that a world-renowned writer had simply vanished, the Nationalist government tried to do so. The governor's response to Wells's telegram read, in its entirety, "I do not know whereabouts of Don Federico García Lorca."

Now, nearly seventy years later, some of the questions surrounding the poet's murder may, finally, be answered. As part of a belated reckoning with the crimes of the Civil War, volunteers all over Spain are trying to identify the location of hundreds of suspected mass graves, and, where possible, to open them. In a scene eerily anticipated by "Poet in New York"—"They combed the cafés, graveyards, and churches for me,/pried open casks and cabinets,/destroyed three skeletons in order to rip out their gold teeth"—what's left of Lorca is scheduled to be dug up.

Exhumations in Spain tend to take place on weekends. This is partly to accommodate the families of the victims, in case they want to be there when the bodies are unearthed, but mostly to accommodate the people who are doing the exhuming, all of whom are donating their time. On a Saturday not long ago, I went to observe an exhumation in the town of Vadocondes, in the province of Burgos. About two hours' drive north of Madrid, the town consists of a few blocks of stone houses and a bar. In the surrounding countryside, farmers grow sugar beets, which, at the time that I visited, were being harvested and lay in huge, lumpy piles in the middle of the fields. The site of the grave—off a tractor road that disappeared into the scrub—was difficult to find, and by the time I got there a three-foot-deep trench had been dug out of the earth, which was a deep red and had the consistency of pancake mix. A few bones—tinted red, like the dirt—could be seen sticking out from the bottom.

The exhumation was being led by Francisco Etxeberria, a professor of forensic medicine at the University of the Basque Country, in San Sebastián, and his wife, Lourdes Herrasti, an archeologist. The couple had brought along several

graduate students, as well as their thirteen-year-old daughter, Igone. The students were removing the dirt from around the bones with little trowels while Etxeberria, who was carrying a pair of garden clippers, kept snipping away the roots that had grown up among the corpses. Whenever one of the graduate students came across something that needed to be packed away—a button, say, or a bullet—Etxeberria would call to Igone, and she would wrap it in tinfoil and put it in a box. At one point, I asked her how many exhumations she had been to. She just shrugged, to indicate that she had lost count.

As the morning wore on, more people kept showing up—a Spanish documentary crew, an Austrian documentary crew, a French journalist, and the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the dead. By the side of the grave, I met José María Rojas Ruiz, who, during the week, works at a perfume shop in the city of Aranda de Duero. Rojas, a volunteer for a group called the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, had spent nearly a year and a half planning the exhumation. He said that he had had trouble getting good information about the location of the grave, and, indeed, the first spot that had been tried, about ten yards away from where we were all standing, turned out to be wrong.

"There is still a lot of fear in the villages," he explained. "When you want to talk to someone, they bring you into a room and close the shutters. They still want to hide." Rojas was expecting to find the bodies of six men, all of whom had lived in the neighboring village of Santa Cruz de la Salceda and all of whom, like Lorca, had been executed on either August 18 or 19, 1936. He had been able to discover the names of five of the men, but not the sixth. When he was asked what had prompted him to devote so much time to the project, he said, "It's a

bit difficult to explain. My ideas are exactly the same, I think, as those of most of the people buried here, and I always thought that if I had had the ill fortune of having been born then, I would have ended up buried in a ditch."

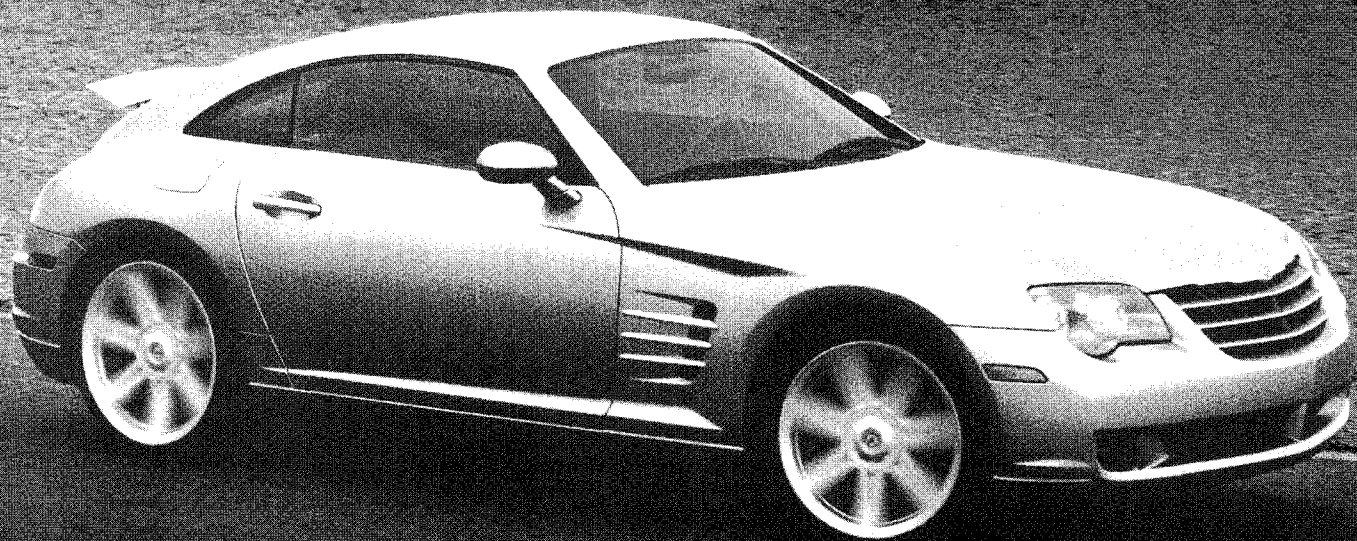
The relatives of the victims had travelled to the exhumation from all parts of Spain. One man, from Bilbao, said that he had seen his father, a farmer with leftist political views, taken away in a cart; a few hours later, someone on a bicycle had ridden by to tell his mother that her husband was dead. A woman from Aranda de Duero remembered watching her grandfather being dragged from his house. He was a Socialist and a prosperous landowner, and at the time he was carried off he had just sold some sheep for three thousand pesetas—in those days a substantial sum. Apparently, he did not understand where he was going, because he took the money along with him. A second woman, from Madrid, said that her father, a blacksmith, had not even been interested in politics; he had been executed, she insisted, because another blacksmith, who had influence with the local Falange, had wanted his business.

"I'd like to make one thing clear," Etxeberria said. "There was no war here. This was the fruit of a reprisal. The Spanish Civil War lasted three years, and it was very cruel, and people killed each other. But there were parts of Spain where there was no war, and yet there are many common graves." Some of the relatives seemed to know who the killers had been but were hesitant to name them. Everyone agreed, though, that the local *lista negra*, or blacklist, had been drawn up with the help of the village doctor, in consultation with the local priest. "The priest helped to kill them," one man said. "His name was Don Emeterio."

Toward the end of the day, Etxeberria summoned everyone over to the trench. It had grown in size to reveal several skeletons heaped on top of one another. Right around the skeletons, the soil, instead of being red, was a rich cocoa color. The plan was to finish preparing the site by evening, and then return the following morning to remove the bones. Etxeberria asked whether any of the family members wanted to say anything. The mood of the gathering, which had been sombre, but in a clinical sort of way, suddenly shifted. A sister of the woman who had



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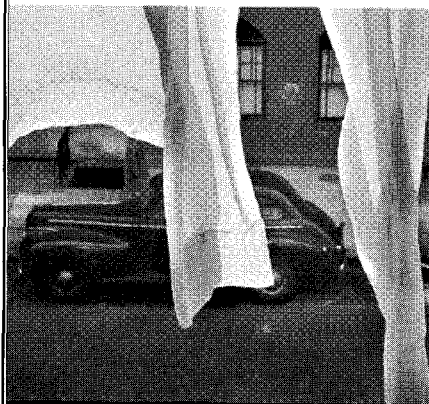
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seen her grandfather being taken away spoke up. "We are here, but my mother, she is the one who really suffered," she said, and started to cry. "She struggled. And now, my brothers and sisters, we feel sadness and pain because of all of this. Not anger—although we don't forget, either—just sadness."

In the town of Monte Torozos, in the province of Valladolid, there is a mass grave believed to contain a thousand corpses. In the town of Órgiva, in the province of Granada, there is one thought to contain more than three thousand, and in the town of Mérida, in Extremadura, there is one suspected of holding thirty-five hundred. By the scale of such atrocities, the grave in Vadocondes is relatively insignificant. Lorca's is even smaller. It is believed to contain just four bodies—in addition to the poet's, those of a one-legged schoolteacher named Dióscoro Galindo González and two banderilleros with anarchist sympathies, Joaquín Arcollas Cabezas and Francisco Galadí Melgar. Still, owing to the delicate arrangement that is the basis of Spanish democracy, few exhumations could be more politically awkward.

To a remarkable degree, modern Spanish politics are founded on a conscious and collectively maintained obliviousness. The Spanish Civil War lasted from the summer of 1936, when Franco led a *pronunciamiento*, or military coup, against the government of the Second Republic, until the spring of 1939, when the Republican forces were defeated. It is estimated that during that time some five hundred thousand people were killed. Of these, perhaps a hundred thousand were executed, and, among the executed, some thirty thousand were disposed of without a trace. Prominent among those shot and dumped in roadside graves were union leaders, anarchists, and members of the Communist Party, but it could be just as dangerous to be a schoolteacher or a successful pharmacist. Many of the victims appear to have been chosen on the basis of what the novelist and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, an acquaintance of Lorca's, called "the spiritual leprosy of Spain: resentment, envy, hatred for intelligence."

After the war, it was the Franco regime's policy never to discuss publicly, or to allow to be discussed in private, what had happened to the missing. Lorca's

writings were banned until 1954, when Franco authorized the publication of a new edition of what was called, misleadingly, "Obras Completas," but even then the circumstances of his death remained off-limits. For more than three decades, Lorca lay in an unmarked grave, and when the site—or what is believed to be the site—finally was publicly identified, in 1971, it was largely owing to the efforts of the poet's Irish biographer, Ian Gibson.

After Franco's death, in 1975, an official reckoning with the country's past seemed at once essential and, at the same time, out of the question. "If you went around villages in Spain, as I did at that time, the impression you got was that there was a seething cauldron of hatred just waiting to burst out," Paul Preston, a professor at the London School of Economics and one of the world's leading authorities on modern Spanish history, told me. "Now, as we know, that didn't happen. And why it didn't happen, it seems to me in sociological terms, is because after the bloody Civil War and after the appalling repression and after forty years of dictatorship the bulk of the people thought any sacrifice was worthwhile to avoid another civil war." The transition to democracy, Preston went on, "was a transaction between moderates of the Franco regime and moderates of the democratic opposition, and part of the negotiated transition was that there wouldn't be any digging up of the past." Spain never held any trials for officials of the dictatorship, nor was there a "truth and reconciliation" process like that in Chile or South Africa. An attempted military coup on February 23, 1981, which sent tanks onto the streets in Valencia and resulted in a daylong occupation of the parliament building, served only to confirm Spaniards' fears about the danger of slipping backward.

Even now, the Spanish government is, semi-officially, opposed to any critical examination of the country's past. Since 1996, the parliament has been controlled by the Partido Popular, or P.P., a right-of-center party that has numerous ties to the Franco regime. Last year, it was revealed that the government was contributing taxpayer money to the National Franco Foundation, which is run by the dictator's daughter, Carmen, and includes among its many pro-Franco activities maintaining fresh flowers on the Caudillo's grave. More recently, the head of the govern-

ment, Prime Minister José María Aznar, helped boost onto the best-seller list an essentially pro-Franco history of the Civil War by naming it as his summer reading. (The book, "The Myths of the Civil War," written by Pío Moa, a former Communist guerrilla, places the blame for the conflict squarely on the left.) In a joke that recently made the rounds on the Internet, Franco comes back from the dead and, inquiring about various P.P. officials, finds that many have familiar names. "Oh, my friend?" he keeps asking. The answer comes back, "No, his son," until finally Franco gets to Manuel Fraga Iribarne, who in the nineteen-sixties served as Minister of Information, and is currently the president of the regional government of Galicia. "Oh, the son," Franco says. The answer—and punch line—is "No, your friend!" The Aznar government has refused to assume any of the cost of, or the responsibility for, digging up Spain's mass graves, even as it is paying to exume the remains of the members of the División Azul, or Blue Division, which fought

alongside the Nazis on the Eastern Front. Earlier this month, when a ceremony honoring Franco's victims was held in the Congreso de los Diputados, the P.P. refused to participate, arguing, in the words of a party spokesman, that the ceremony represented a "return to the past" which "contributes nothing positive."

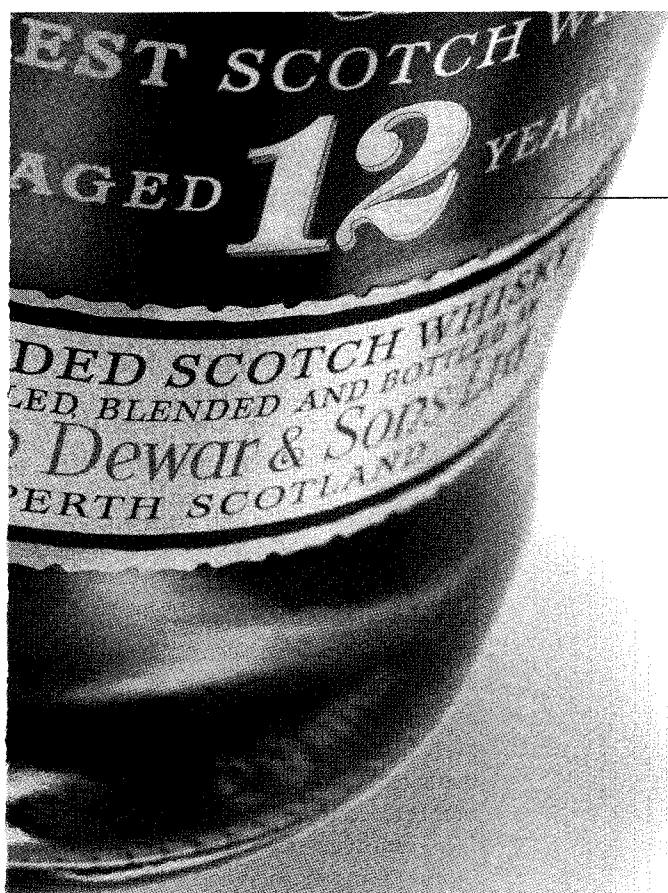
It is in this context that the Lorca exhumation acquires its peculiar significance. "Because he was so famous, Lorca's death was symbolic," Soledad Fox, a professor of Spanish and comparative literature at Williams College, several of whose relatives were jailed by Franco, told me. "It was used to intimidate people. And it's ironic that now, because he is so famous, he puts a face on the whole exhumation process. His fame is keeping the tragic history of the Spanish Civil War alive."

When the Spanish talk about not talking about their history, they use the term *el Pacto del Silencio*, or the Pact of Silence. The term refers, most specifically, to the government's decision to avoid

trials and official inquiries, but in many families the term has another meaning.

Emilio Silva is a co-founder of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. His grandfather, who was also named Emilio Silva, was murdered, together with a dozen other people, on October 16, 1936, and buried in an unmarked grave. Silva's grandmother lived on for another sixty years. "I was thirty-two when my grandmother died," Silva told me recently when we met at a café in Madrid. "During my childhood, every summer I spent two months with her. And she never talked about my grandfather. Nothing, no explanations. If we were at a family dinner, and my father and his brothers would start to talk about the past, when they got to the forties my grandmother would say, 'That's enough,' and everybody knew what she meant."

Silva, now thirty-eight, has dark curly hair, dark eyes, and an affably distracted manner. (In the time we spent talking, he fielded nearly a dozen cell-phone calls and moved his car three times to avoid a



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parking ticket.) By profession, he is a freelance journalist, and in the spring of 2000 he was working on a novel that recounts the story of his grandfather and of two Republican exiles who return home after many years in Argentina. Short on historical details for the book, he went to do research in Villafranca del Bierzo, outside the city of León, where his grandfather used to keep a store.

While in the area, Silva decided to ask around to see if anyone knew what had happened to his grandfather. People kept offering him their own gruesome stories instead. "I don't know," one man told him. "But on my land, when I put in tomatoes, there are three bodies." Another old man said, "In this village, there are more people outside the cemetery than inside." Finally, Silva ran into a man who remembered having been woken up by shooting on the night his grandfather was murdered. The man had been ten years old at the time, and recalled having run to his parents' bedroom in fright.

"He told me, 'You have to go to the next village,'" Silva said. "There's the principal road and another road to the center of town. At this intersection, you have the grave.' I went walking, and when I arrived at this place there was another man, walking with his hands behind his back, looking at the mountains.

And I said, 'Good afternoon, you have to help me.' 'O.K., what?' 'I am looking for a grave of thirteen or fourteen people from the Spanish Civil War.' And he said, 'Under this walnut tree is the grave.'" Silva subsequently learned that in this village—Priaranza del Bierzo—the grave's existence was no secret. By way of inculcating patriotism, a local teacher aligned with the new regime had taken his students to see it as it was being dug. Not surprisingly, those who had participated in the outing still recalled it vividly decades later.

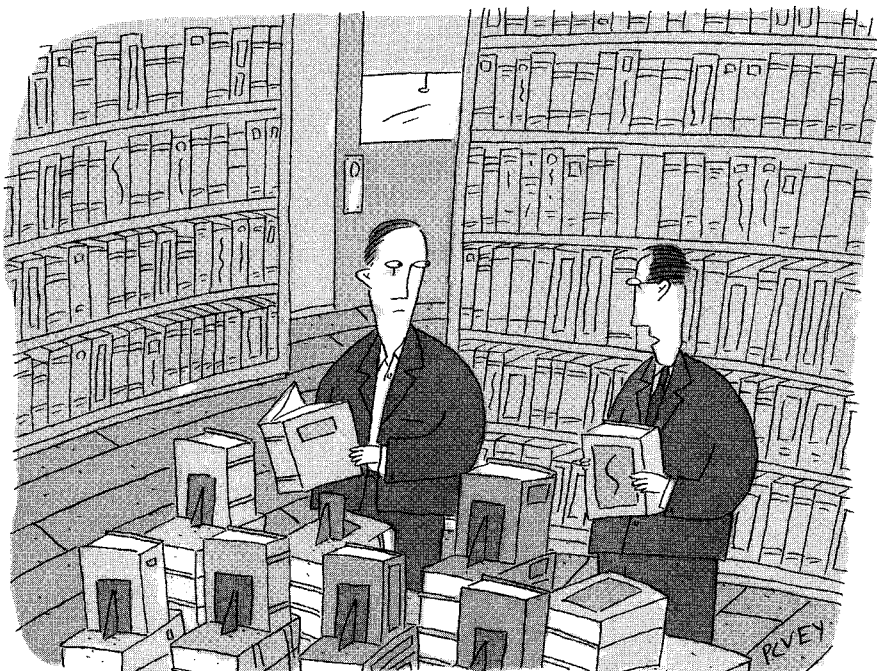
Silva's first response was to write about what he had discovered. In an article entitled "My Grandfather Too Was a Desaparecido," which ran in *La Crónica de León*, León's major newspaper, he equated the missing of the Spanish Civil War with those of the "dirty wars" of Chile and Argentina. One of the many people to react to the piece was an archeologist whose mother had grown up in Priaranza. He said that he had known the location of the grave all his life, and he volunteered to help recover the remains. Even with all of the information Silva had gathered, it was not until the third day of digging that evidence of the grave was found: the sole of a shoe. "That was one of the most intense moments of my life," Silva told me.

The exhumation of what became

known as the Priaranza Thirteen, on October 28, 2000, was the first of its kind in Spain. "My idea was to identify the body of my grandfather and put the body in the tomb of my grandmother," Silva told me. "But during the days of the exhumation many old people, most of them women, came and told us stories like my family's. They were looking for brothers or fathers." Together with some of the people who had approached him, Silva decided to form a group to help coordinate their searches—the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory.

Over the last three years, the group has assisted in opening thirty-nine graves in seven provinces, from which a total of two hundred and fifty-six bodies have been removed. It has a list of three thousand other victims whose families have requested its help. On this list are descendants of two of the men, Galindo González and Galadí Melgar, believed to be buried with Lorca. Lorca, who never married, has no direct descendants. His six nieces and nephews have requested that his body be left undisturbed. "There are some people who believe that being in a mass grave is something degrading, which we do not believe," Manuel Fernández-Montesinos García, the son of Lorca's sister Concha, told me. "There's really no need for this macabre show." Fernández-Montesinos and Lorca's other relatives have said they have not decided whether they will provide DNA samples to help with the identification of the poet's corpse. Scientists at the University of Granada have stated that they would not necessarily need the family's DNA, but instead could rely on 3-D images of Lorca's skull, developed from old photographs. The exhumation is expected to occur early next year.

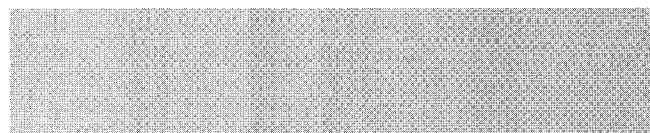
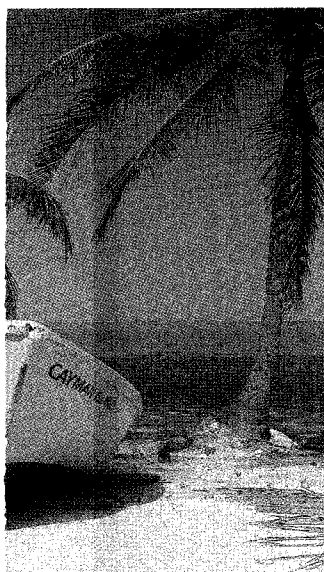
On the second day of the exhumation in Vadocondes, I hitched a ride back to the site with the Austrian documentary crew. It had rained overnight, and to protect the exposed skeletons a series of tarps had been strung from the trees. By this point, it was clear that there were, as expected, six bodies in the grave, and Etxeberria had marked each one with a little numbered card. Individuals No. 1 and No. 3 were lying next to each other, more or less on top of Individuals No. 2 and No. 6, while Individuals No. 4 and No. 5 were off to one side, perhaps in a part of the grave that had been dug later. Two of



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the skeletons had shoes (or at least parts of shoes): in one case, a pair of thick leather soles; in another, shoes known as *albarcas*, the soles of which are made of old tires.

Before turning over the remains to the families, Etxeberria was planning to take the bones back to his lab, in San Sebastián, for more analysis. He had already confirmed that all of the victims were male and had decided that, of the group, Individuals No. 3 and No. 5 were the oldest. (One clue to a person's age is his pelvic bones; in the young, these bones have a rough surface, while in the old they are smooth.) The graduate students were kneeling on the bottom of the trench, looking cold and very damp. "You, tibia," Etxeberria said, giving out assignments. "You, skull."

Individual No. 1 was lifted out first, piece by piece. He had been a large man, and, according to Etxeberria's assessment, in his twenties or thirties at the time of his death. His skull was shattered, indicating that he had been shot in the head at close range. Before he had been killed, he had apparently been brutalized: both of his arms were broken, one of them probably by a bullet. His position in the grave suggested that he had been the last to be thrown in, and Herrasti suggested to me that the reason for this, and also for his two broken arms, was that he had put up resistance. When I thought about this, I felt, for the first time since arriving in Vadocondes, that I might be sick.

The removal of the bodies went on for several hours. Each bone was wrapped in newspaper, and placed in a cardboard box; when the box was full, Igone would tape it up and carry it off to a little tent. The crowd around the grave was considerably smaller than it had been the previous day, and consisted mostly of the grandchildren of the Socialist. They still owned the house in the neighboring village of Santa Cruz de la Salceda where the grandfather had been seized. I got to talking with one of them, a teacher of philosophy who now lives in Zaragoza. Although he was born twelve years after his grandfather's death, in school, he told me, he had been branded a "red" and bullied by his classmates.

After a while, all the bodies had been disinterred except for Individual No. 6, who was wearing the leather shoes. He was very slight, and, according to Etxeberria, also very young, perhaps no more than a teen-ager. Just as the students

were about to start wrapping up his remains, it began to thunder, and then to pour. The rain collected on the tarps and spilled over the edges, and as it streamed into the trench it picked up the color of the dirt, forming what looked, discomfitingly, like a pool of blood.

When the rain stopped, everyone headed over to Santa Cruz for lunch. It took place in a house called a *merendero*, used for parties and family gatherings, which was decorated with old farm implements and a pair of *albarcas* just like the ones that had been found inside the grave. We all sat down at two long tables. I happened to be seated next to the woman who had seen her grandfather carried off, and I asked her how she felt. "Tonight, I will sleep well," she told me.

Lorca grew up in and around Granada, not far from where he died. The area is dotted with monuments to him, many of which are popular tourist destinations. (A dead person in Spain, Lorca once observed, "is more alive than anywhere else in the world.") One day, I flew down from Madrid to Granada, to visit the sites and talk to Ian Gibson, the poet's biographer. Gibson, who lives just outside the city, met me at the airport. We drove first to the town of Valderrubio, where Lorca spent some of his childhood, but didn't stop at Valderrubio's Lorca museum because, as Gibson explained, some of the townspeople feel that in his two-volume work on the poet's life he had given Valderrubio short shrift. Instead, we drove on to the nearby village of Fuente Vaqueros, where Lorca was born, and at the local café we ran into a guide from Fuente Vaqueros's Lorca museum. The guide was an old friend of Gibson's, and he insisted on buying us breakfast before showing us around the museum's collection, which includes, among other things, the poet's cradle.

Gibson, who is sixty-four, is a bearish-looking man with a broad face, wiry gray hair, and a scholar's intensity. In 1965, while teaching Spanish at Queen's University, in Belfast, he took a year's sabbatical in Granada to research a dissertation on regional influences in Lorca's poetry. The Granadinos whom he met kept insisting that they knew why he was really there, which was to investigate Lorca's death. Eventually, Gibson decided that they were right. He jettisoned the dissertation, which, as he pointed out

to me, "no one was ever going to read," and went to work trying to solve the mystery of the poet's disappearance. In one sense, his problem was that there was too little information available, in another, that there was too much.

"There were a thousand versions circulating, and people were trying to score points and pretending to knowledge they didn't have," Gibson told me. "And every time they told you something, they told you something different the following evening. I spent nights drinking with people and, of course, they were teasing me. All I wanted was some facts—a document, a date—and it was simply impossible." In 1971, Gibson published the results of his reporting as "La Represión Nacionalista de Granada en 1936 y la Muerte de Federico García Lorca." Because this was still the Franco era, the book had to be printed in Paris, and the only way to get a copy of it in Spain was to smuggle it. (In 1973, the book was published in English as "The Death of Lorca.")

One of the more poignant facts to emerge from Gibson's work is that Lorca's death could have been avoided. The weeks leading up to the coup that triggered the Civil War were filled with strikes, street violence, and high-level assassinations, and it was clear that the government of the Republic was unravelling. Lorca agonized over what to do in response. Against the advice of many of his colleagues, he decided to travel from Madrid, where he had been living, to Granada on July 13th, just four days before Franco's uprising began. "God's will be done," he told one friend before rushing off to buy a train ticket. Within a week, Granada had fallen under Nationalist control; Madrid remained Republican territory until the end of the war.

Lorca's leftist views were well known in Spain. His tragedies, while not explicitly political, could be viewed as an attack on the oppressive nature of Spanish society. "I will always be on the side of those who have nothing and who are not even allowed to enjoy the nothing they have in peace," he once asserted. Yet at the same time Lorca refused to join any party and spoke of himself as operating entirely outside of ideology. "As for me, I'll never be political," he told a friend in Madrid shortly before the war broke out. "I'm a revolutionary, because all true poets are revolutionaries—don't you agree?—but political, never!" One of the leitmotifs

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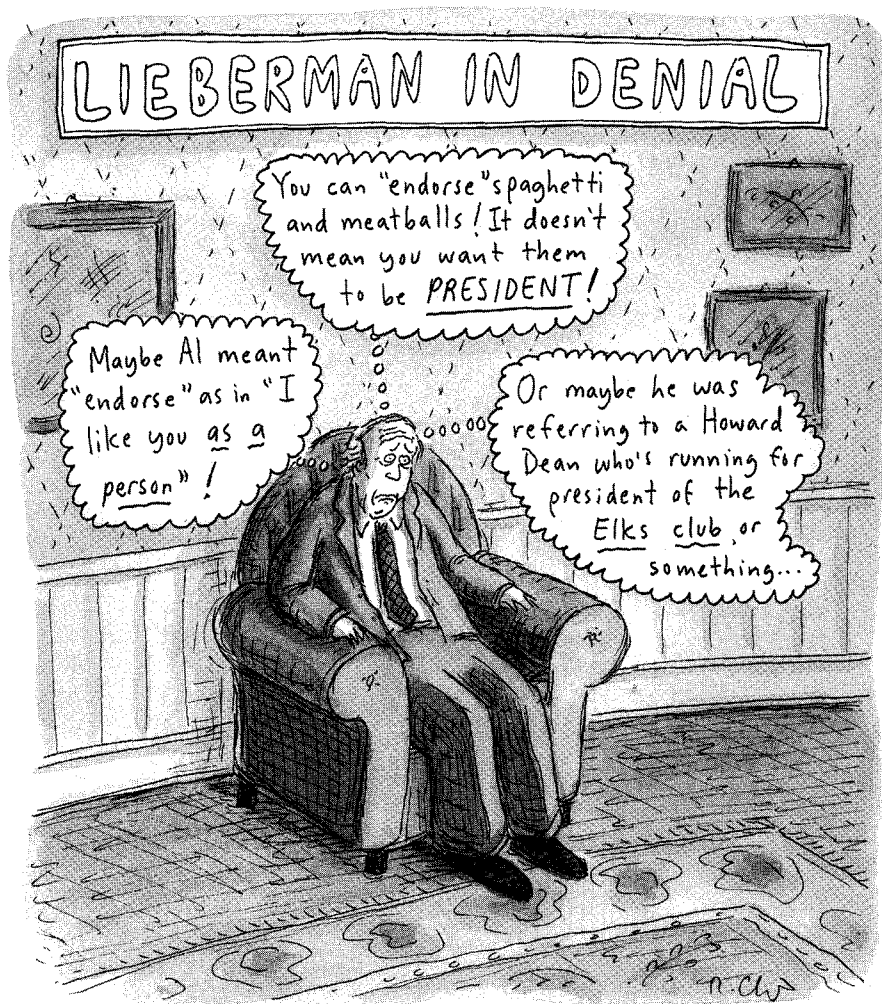
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of Lorca's poetry is a longing that has no clear object. "The genuine pain that keeps everything awake/is a tiny, infinite burn/on the innocent eyes of other systems," he writes in "Blind Panorama of New York." When it became evident that his life was in danger, Lorca was offered a chance to escape into the Republican zone but turned it down. ("He was terrified by the thought of being all alone in a no man's land between the two zones," a friend who had offered to help him recalled.) Instead, he took refuge in the house of a fellow-poet, Luis Rosales, whose brothers were prominent members of the local Fascist organization.

What information there is about Lorca's activities in this period comes mainly from the Rosales brothers, four of whom Gibson succeeded in speaking with. According to their account, the poet spent his final days of freedom listening to the radio; flipping through *Ideal*, a Catholic daily; and playing a piano that the family had installed in his room for him. He read the works of Gonzalo de Berceo, a medieval monk, and talked of his intention to write an epic poem along the lines of "Paradise Lost." Whenever a Republican airplane flew overhead, he would hide under his bed. At one point, he and Luis Rosales discussed the possibility of collaborating on an elegy to those who had fallen on both sides of the conflict. Shortly after this, on August 16th, Lorca was arrested by a prominent local Fascist named Ramón Ruiz Alonso. (The same day, Lorca's brother-in-law—Concha's husband—a socialist who had recently been elected mayor of Granada, was executed.) Remarkably, Gibson also managed to talk to Ruiz Alonso, who admitted having taken Lorca into custody but insisted "before a crucifix" that this was the only part he had played in the proceedings "from beginning to end." Gibson was never able to determine if Ruiz Alonso was telling him the truth. "I thought that somebody else would take over and come up with more information, but that hasn't happened," he told me. (Ruiz Alonso has since died.)

From Fuente Vaqueros, Gibson drove west. The once sleepy countryside around Granada is rapidly being developed into row after row of identical villas perched on the hillsides. Near the town of Alfacar, we passed a spring that the Arabs, who ruled the area from the early thirteenth century until 1492, called Ainadamar, or



the Fountain of Tears. A new house was going up next to it. A little way up the road, we came to the spot where Gibson believes Lorca is buried.

Lorca's grave was pointed out to Gibson in 1966 by a man, nicknamed Manolo the Communist, who claimed to have dug it. In 1986, a small park was established at the site and the grave was marked with a slab of gray granite. Gibson told me that he believed Manolo was telling him the truth, but he allowed that it was entirely possible that Lorca was elsewhere. According to one set of rumors, the Nationalist authorities, alarmed by the attention the poet's death was receiving, exhumed his body not long after it had been buried and moved it. According to another set of rumors, Lorca was actually interred in the next town, in a mass grave known as *el barranco*, or the ravine, which is believed to hold several hundred bodies.

As Gibson and I wandered around the park, which has a small amphitheatre and

benches decorated with bits of Lorca's poetry, we passed a group of elderly Spaniards returning to their tour bus. "Maybe I'm a primitive man," Gibson told me, gesturing toward the grave, "but I would like to be able to stand there and know that the remains of this great poet were there or not there." Pausing by the granite marker, I felt that I understood his desire for certitude. Until a body is found, Lorca's death will remain, in an important sense, unresolved—a situation that was, presumably, just what his murderers intended. At the same time, an exhumation that yields nothing would also be fitting—an equivocal end suited to Lorca's morbid sensibility. "But they couldn't find me anymore," he writes after describing the search for his body in "Fable of Three Friends to Be Sung in Rounds":

They couldn't?
No, they couldn't find me.
But they discovered the sixth moon had
fled against the torrent,
and the sea—suddenly!—remembered
the names of all its drowned. ♦

HOT OR COLD

My earliest memory of winter is of being left in a van, in the snow somewhere in Montana, while my parents, out cross-country skiing, were chased by a bear.

It sounds suspect to me, too, like a half-remembered dream. I was four, and my brother was two. The van was my parents' red Volkswagen bus, with flowered curtains and the back converted into a bed. There was a babysitter, a pretty teen-age girl I called Ann Amou-ski—not her name but my approximation. She was nice, but I was bored. She hid hard candies for me, and then told me if I was hot or cold. Behind the seats? Cold. In the glove compartment? Getting warmer. Near the gas pedal? Burning up. Under the clutch! There it was—a smooth round butterscotch candy in a yellow cellophane wrapper, the kind of thing my parents would never buy except on a trip like this.

We played outside in our snowsuits, and then the sitter turned on the engine and the heat. We sat near the vents, drinking hot chocolate from a thermos lid. The windows were frosted from our breathing.

Out there in the snow, where we couldn't see, my parents glided along, still married to each other. My mother was younger than I am now. They wore wool pants and sweaters and hats, and it was only from a distance that their progress looked effortless and unimpeded. Up close, the gliding through fresh snow made them sweat, and my father's glasses steamed up. Their noses and cheeks were red, and they were laughing at a joke he'd made. The high clear air smelled like Douglas fir and snow.

Then they saw the bear. They had taken it by surprise, startling it up out

of a snowbank where it was digging for roots, and it blocked their way back to the road. It stood on its hind legs, nearsighted, and sniffed to see what they were.

The standoff went on for what seemed like minutes, and then the bear dropped back to its forelegs to keep digging. My father, unsure what to do,



started on a detour, a wide semicircle around the bear.

When they were safely past, my mother looked back to see the bear following them, in the tracks their skis had made in the snow. She had chicken sandwiches in her backpack, and she called to my father, who turned to look.

"Ski faster," he said. "But not too fast. And sing."

They started to sing "The Bear Went Over the Mountain," but it had no effect on the real bear, which ambled along in their tracks. Like the bear in the song, this one had nowhere pressing to go. It would go wherever they flattened a trail for it, to see what it could see. They were leading it right back to the bus, to where the kids might be playing in the snow, but they couldn't stop.

"Let's spread out," my father said after a while. "So we don't make such a wide path."

They did, out of breath now, each breaking a separate trail. The bear paused when it reached the fork, and

then followed my mother. It didn't seem to mind the single set of tracks.

"Now what?" she said, starting to panic.

"Keep skiing," he said.

When the Volkswagen was in sight, they waved, trying to signal that we should stay in the bus. Then they watched, horrified, as we all piled out to greet them, my brother in the babysitter's arms, a perfect snack.

From the bus, I heard my father shout, "Get back in the car!" Then I saw the bear. The sitter hustled my brother in, and I watched as they all bore down on us, my parents skiing ten feet apart, the bear lumbering inexorably behind. Finally the bear saw or

smelled the Volkswagen, and stopped. I was lifted inside by my armpits. My parents arrived breathless, and struggled out of their skis while the bear watched, deliberating. The doors slammed closed, and we drove away. Being eaten by a bear wasn't our fate; life had granted us all a reprieve.

I called my father to find out what I'd got right about the story, and he said, "What? You're dreaming that. There was a mama moose that chased us once, but it was summer." Summer and a moose—all I'd been sure of was snow and bear.

"Bears hibernate in the winter," he said, and then he suggested three other run-ins with grizzlies that I might be thinking of. None was my pre-divorce winter scene, but mine still feels right: the bus, the sitter, the snow. My parents separating to avoid the thing that threatened us, the thing bearing down on us anyway, and then the family rescue at the last minute, disaster left outside in the cold.

—Maile Meloy

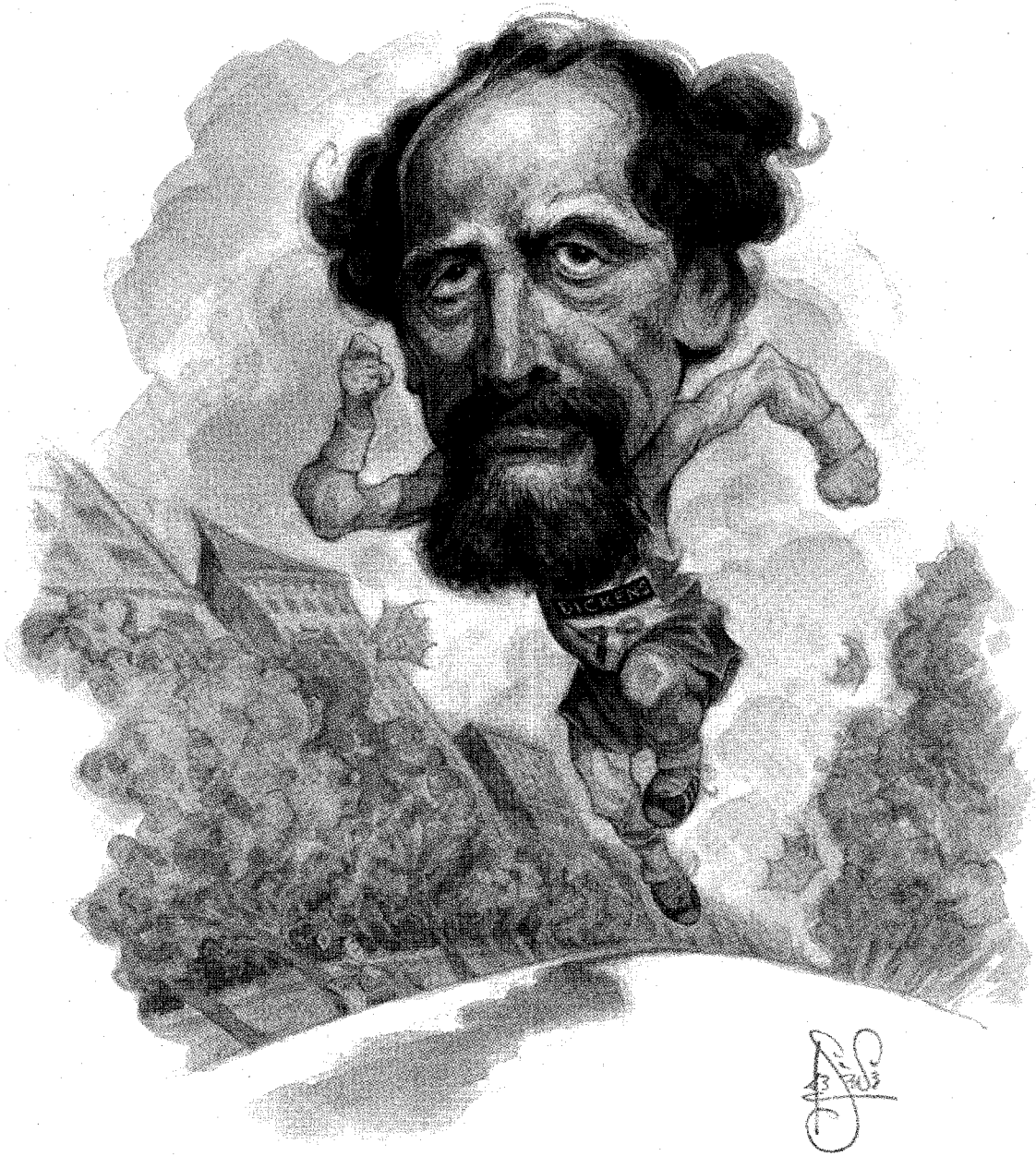
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PERSONAL HISTORY

CHICAGO CHRISTMAS, 1984

How a holiday party went wrong.

BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

At twenty-six, at the embarrassing end of a series of attempts at channeling Kerouac, I was beyond broke, back in my home town, living in my aunt and uncle's basement. Having courted and won a girl I had courted but never come close to winning in high school, I was now losing her via my pathetically dwindling prospects. One night she said, "I'm

came the Great White Dope. Our job was to move the hot tar from a vat on the ground to the place on the roof where the real roofing was done. Leon had a thick Mississippi accent and no top teeth. He stayed on the ground, pulleying the smoking buckets up to us, muttering obscenities at passing grannies and schoolgirls. John was forty-two, gentle-voiced, and digni-

"I don't think you were there that day maybe," said John. "It was Lawrence hired me."

Lawrence was dead now, a famous Fezziwiggian presence, mourned by all.

"You are so full of shit," said Vic. "If you were so fast then, why are you so shitty now?"

"You roof like my mother," said Gary, the owner's brother.

"Maybe your mother roofs good," John mumbled.

"She don't," said Gary. "But still she's faster than you."

All that fall, John grieved over the fact that he was not allowed to do the real and dignified work of a master roofer.

"It ain't right," he'd say to me. "I can do it. They need to give me a chance. I'm



not saying I'm great or anything, but still I think I deserve better than this."

That fall, my uncle called in a favor and soon I was on a roofing crew, one of three grunts riding from job to job in the freezing open back of a truck. My fellow-grunts, Leon and John, were the only black guys on the crew, and hence I was known as the Great White Hope. Once everyone had seen me work, I be-

fied, with a salt-and-pepper beard and his own roofing tools, which he brought to work every day, even though he was never allowed to do anything but lug tar. John had roofed all his adult life, and claimed to have virtuosoed his way into this job by appearing on the job site one day and outshingling the best white shingler.

"I guess I don't remember that," said Vic, our supervisor.

an older man. Got responsibilities. Can't just keep carrying tar my whole life."

In late November, talk turned to the yearly Christmas party. Drinks and food were on Warner, the owner. People got shitfaced. Also, there was gambling.

"Then we're gonna see," Vic said one day. "We're gonna see if John here is a better gambler than he is a roofer."

"You gotta hope," said Gary.

"As a roofer, John, face it, you suck," Vic said. "Nice guy, shit roofer."

"Too fucking slow, John," Gary said. "We keep giving you chances and you keep screwing it up."

"But maybe why he's a shit roofer is he's a gambling man," said Vic.

"What y'all are gonna find out is I'm a roofer and a gambler both," said John.

"Excuse me saying it," Vic said when John had gone down to help Leon load the cauldron. "But that is a prime example of nigger-think. He *thinks* he's a roofer because he *says* he is. *Thinks* he can gamble because he *says* he can."

"Has fourteen kids and lets the welfare pay," said Gary.

One payday John asked could I give him a ride home. I gave him a ride, but, it turned out, not to his home. We drove deep into South Shore, past houses we'd roofed, then into an area too poor to roof, down a block of slumping two-flats.

"My friend's place," John said. "I'm gonna get you and your lady some Sherman Juice so you can have a little party."

What was Sherman Juice? We'd started drinking at the shop and I was now too drunk to ask. In the kitchen, under duelling photos of M.L.K. and J.F.K., sat an ancient black woman in a rocking chair. A mad kid dashed around, humming at me: *You devil, you white*. John's friend did not have any Sherman Juice but did have a Polaroid of his girlfriend going down on him. In the photo, taken from his P.O.V., we could see, in addition to his penis, his feet, in black socks. She was looking at the camera, smiling, sort of.

"Wow, is she pretty," I said politely.

The friend and I sat there together, admiring her. Then John and I went somewhere else. Where we went was John's wife's apartment. They lived apart. Living apart, they got more money, and with more money they could buy a house sooner. In the apartment was a TV and fourteen kids around it. John named them, rapid-fire, with only a few stumbles.

"You really have fourteen kids," I said.

"Yes, I do," he said. "Every one mine. Right, baby?"

"I should hope so," said his wife.

No chairs, no couch, newspapers on the windows. John and his wife cuddled on a blanket.

"When we get our real house, you

come over," John's wife said. "Bring your lady."

"Bring your lady, and we'll all of us have dinner," John said.

"I hope that day come soon," said John's wife.

"I hope it come damn soon," John said. "I don't like all this living separate from my babies."

The kids giggled that he'd said "damn." He went around kissing them all as I paced and lectured myself in the hallway, trying to sober up for the long drive home.

As long as it didn't snow, we could roof. Every morning, I woke at four, checked for snow. If there was no snow, I called in. If someone skillless and slow might be useful that day,

TO MY BROTHER

Our mother wrote to you
before you were born
a note you might open
at some later date
in case she should not
be there to tell you
what was in her mind
about wanting you
when she had not seen you

that was before
my time and it
never turned out like that
you never saw the letter
and she never saw you
who were perfect they said
and dead within minutes
that far ahead
of me and always
looking the other way
and I would be the one
to open the letter
after she was gone

and you had answered it
without a word
before I was there
to find out about you
unseen elder
you perfect one
firstborn

—W. S. Merwin

Warner told me to come in. I rose, put on all five of my shirts (I had no coat), and drove down in my Nova, de-icing the windshield as I went, via reaching out the window and hacking with a putty knife I kept for that purpose.

From the roofs, the city looked medieval, beautiful. I wrote poems in my head, poems that fizzled out under the weight of their own bloat: *O Chicago, giver and taker of life, city of bald men in pool halls, also men of hair, men who have hair, hairy men*, etc., etc. On the roofs, we found weird things: a dead rat, a bike tire, somebody's dragon-headed pool floatie, all frozen stiff.

Mid-December then, and still no snow. Strange Chicago crèches appeared in front yards: Baby Jesus, freed from the manger, leaned against a Santa sleigh

half his height. He was crouching, as if about to jump; he wore just a diaper. Single strings of colored lights lay across bushes, as if someone had hatefully thrown them there. We patched the roof of a Jamaican immigrant whose apartment had nothing in it but hundreds of rags, spread across the floor and hanging from interior clotheslines. Nobody asked why. As we left, she offered us three Diet Rite colas.

Then it was the Christmas party. The way we knew it was festive was the garage had been cleared of dog shit. It had also been cleared of the dog, a constantly barking mutt who even bit Warner. He bit Warner, he bit the shovel head Warner thrust at him, sometimes we came in and found him resolutely gnawing the leg of the worktable with a fine sustained rage. Tonight, festively, the dog was locked in the cab of a truck. Now and then, he would hurl himself against the windshield, and somebody, festively, would fling at the windshield a plastic fork or a hamburger bun. The other components of the festivity were a plate of cold cuts on the table where normally the gutters were pre-bent, a garbage can full of iced beer, and a cardboard box holding some dice.

We ate, we drank, the checks were distributed, we waddled drunkenly across South Chicago Avenue to the Currency Exchange to cash the checks, after which the gambling began. I didn't know a thing about gambling and didn't want to. I rolled my four fresh hundreds and put them in the front pocket of my tar-stiff jeans, occasionally patting the pocket to make sure they were still real.

Finally, in terms of money, I got it: money forestalled disgrace. I thought of my aunt, who worked three jobs and whom I had not yet paid a dime for food, and of my girlfriend, who now paid whenever we went out, which was never, because my five shirts were too stained with tar.

"You ain't gambling, Leon?" said Vic.

Leon said something nobody understood, and disappeared out the door.

"I suspect Leon is pussy-bound," said Gary.

"Smart man," said Vic.

John did gambler things with his shirtsleeves, spat on his hands, hopped around on one foot, blew on the dice.

Then he laid his four hundreds out near the craps box and gave them a lecture: They were to go forth and multiply. They were to find others of their kind and come scampering back.

Vic had gone to the bank that morning. He showed us his roll. It held maybe three thousand dollars. His wife didn't dare say shit about it. Who earned it, him or her? "I do," he answered himself.

The gambling began. One by one, the guys lost what they felt they could lose and drifted back to stand against the worktable and diddle with the soldering irons. Soon only John was left. Why was John left? Vic kept taunting. A whole autumn of such taunts now did their work. All belittled men dream of huge redemption. Here was John, dreaming. In response to John's dreaming, Vic and Gary began to speak with mock-professorial diction.

"Look at this, kindly look at this," Vic shouted. "John is not, after all, any more a gambler than he is a ergo roofer. That is, he is a equally sucky gambler as he is a suckass roofer."

"Are you saying," said Gary, "that his gambling, in terms of how much does it suck, sucks exactly as much as does suck his roofing?"

"Perzackly, yup, that is just what I am saying, doctor," Vic burped.

John burned. They were going to see. They were going to see that the long years of wrongs done him had created a tremendous backlog of owed good luck, which was going to surge forward now, holy and personal.

And see they did. Soon John was down to his last hundred, and then he broke it, and then he was down to his last twenty. Then Vic cackled, and John threw his sole remaining five at Vic's chest. Vic caught it, kissed it, added it to his tremendous wad.

A light went on in my head and has stayed on ever since: It was all about capital. Vic could lose and lose and never really lose. Once John dipped below four hundred, he was dead. He was dead now.

Which was when Warner came in and passed out the bonus checks.

Warner was the owner, the big man. Tonight he was wearing a tie. Afternoons he drove from site to site in his

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Lincoln, cranking out estimates, listening to opera, because, he said, though it was fag music, it floated his boat.

John took his check, made for the door. I followed him out.

"You're doing right," I said. "Go on home."

"Ain't going home," John said, and numb-footed across South Chicago again.

"No, no, no," I mumbled, vividly drunk, suddenly alive. What had happened to me? Christ, where was I? Whither my promise, my easy season of victories, my field of dominant, my dominant field of my boyhood, boyhood playful triumph?

It was so cold my little mustache had frozen.

Our bonuses matched: three hundred each.

The man at the Currency Exchange looked at us either sadly or suspiciously, I couldn't tell which. When I doubled back to ask, he reached for something under the counter.

"Go home, man," I said to John out on the street. "You at least got your bonus, right?"

"Can't, can't," John huffed. "Got to get all that back. No way that man's taking my Christmas money for my babies."

"You're not going to get it back, John," I said.

"Ain't I, though," he said.

The same law that had broken him the first time broke him again. Vic took it and took it.

"Vic, Vic," I said, so drunk I was unsure I was actually speaking.

"What am I supposed to do?" Vic said, glaring at me. "He's a man, right? He wants to play. Ain't nobody forcing him."

"Ain't nobody forcing me," John said.

Vic had a fat round face and little black glasses. He was Polish but looked kamikaze. His cheeks were red and his glasses were fogged, it seemed to me, from the gross extent of his trickery.

"You want to quit, John?" Vic said. "Great White Dope here thinks I'm hustling you. Maybe you should quit. So what if you suck as a gambler? Just walk away, right?"

"Nobody hustling nobody here," said John.

"See, Dope?" Vic said to me. "John's a man."

"I am that," said John.

Soon John was wadding and throwing his last ten.

"Fair's fair," he gasped, and lurched out.

I followed. Should I offer him mine? If I offered him mine, he might take it. So I offered him a portion of mine in a way that simultaneously offered and made it clear I was not offering. He said he didn't want none of mine. He had to get home. His babies were waiting. He didn't know what his wife would say, or what he would say to her.

"I'll have to just tell her, I guess," he said. "Just up and say it, get it over with: Baby, they ain't no Christmas. And don't give me no lip about it."

He wiped his face top to bottom, the saddest gesture I'd ever seen.

Then he walked off into the side-blowing snow.

I was sad yet happy. I was drunk. I was deeply, deeply glad I wasn't him.

Back inside, Vic was protesting, though nobody was asking him to.

"A man's a man," he was saying. "You play, you lose, you accept it. John's a man. He knows that. He gets that. I admire that."

"He's gonna have a shit Christmas, though," somebody said.

"These people live for shit Christmases," Vic said. "They run right directly toward shit Christmases. It's all they know. It's in their blood." Then he put his wad back in his pocket.

The craps box was cast aside, and the roofers bent to their drinks. Somebody hauled over a length of gutter and a few of them went at it with tin snips, proving some point or other.

I stumbled out to my Nova, putty-knifed myself a sight-hole, drove home.

There comes that phase in life when, tired of losing, you decide to stop losing, then continue losing. Then you decide to really stop losing, and continue losing. The losing goes on and on so long you begin to watch with curiosity, wondering how low you can go.

All that winter, once a week or so, I'd been stopping at a pay phone off Stony Island to call the Field Museum, where a kind woman had once praised my qualifications.

"Anything yet?" I'd say.

"Not yet," she'd say. Once, she said, "We need a security guard, ha-ha, but that, of course, is way beneath your level."

"Oh, ha-ha, right," I said.

But I was thinking, Could I work my way up? Could I, in my security-guard uniform, befriend a doddering curator, impress him with my knowledge of fossils, my work ethic, my quiet respect for science?

"Keep calling, though," she said.

"Oh, I will," I said.

And I did, until finally it got too embarrassing, and I stopped.

Early spring, I fled town, leaving my aunt unrepaired, my girlfriend convinced, forever, I suppose, that this snivelling lesser me was the real one.

I went somewhere else and started over, pulled head out of ass, made a better life. And I wouldn't go back to that roofing me or that roofing time for anything in the world.

But sometimes I imagine myself standing at that pay phone, in my tar-hardened clothes.

"This is so great," the Field Museum woman is saying. "Come down, come down, we finally have something suitable for you. I'm so happy to finally be able to tell you this."

"I'll be right there," I say.

Then it's a few weeks later, after first payday, and I pull up to my girlfriend's house, wearing clean clothes. All day long, I have been, say, writing about the brontosaurus. I have certainly, at this point, learned a lot about brontosauri. In fact, I have been selected to go to a Brontosaurus Conference in, say, Miami, Florida. We go out to dinner. My aunt meets us there. I have by now repaid her for all the food she fed me those many months. Also, I've bought her a new dress, just to be nice. The dinner is excellent. I pay. After dinner, the three of us sit there laughing, laughing about the fact that I, an assistant curator at the famous Field Museum, was once a joke of a roofer who worked with jerks, jerks who didn't like me, and who cheated a nice man out of his Christmas. ♦

BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

From the Economist.

During a long and improbable life Spiegel sloughed off more skins than a bed of snakes, and a biographer's first task is to keep their footing.

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"I spent \$2,342 on violent and
suggestive video games."

LET IT SNOW

Winters were frustratingly mild in North Carolina, but the year I was in the fifth grade we got lucky. Snow fell, and, for the first time in years, it accumulated. School was cancelled, and two days later we got lucky again. There were eight inches on the ground, and, rather than melting, it froze. On the fifth day of our vacation, my mother had a little breakdown. Our presence had disrupted the secret life she led while we were at school, and when she could no longer take it she threw us out. It wasn't a gentle request but something closer to an eviction. "Get the hell out of my house," she said.

We reminded her that it was our house, too, and she opened the front door and shoved us into the carport. "And stay out!" she shouted.

My sisters and I went down the hill and sledded with other children from the neighborhood. A few hours later, we returned home, surprised to find that the door was locked. "Oh, come on," we said. I rang the bell, and when no one answered we went to the window and saw our mother in the kitchen, watching television. Normally she waited until five o'clock to have a drink, but for the past few days she'd been making an exception. Drinking didn't count if you followed a glass of wine with a cup of coffee, and so she had a goblet and a mug positioned before her on the countertop.

"Hey!" we yelled. "Open the door. It's us." We knocked on the pane and, without looking in our direction, she refilled her goblet and left the room.

"That bitch," my sister Lisa said. We pounded again and again, and when our mother failed to answer we went around back and threw snowballs at her bedroom window. "You are going to be in so much trouble when Dad gets home!" we shouted, and in response my mother pulled the drapes. Dusk approached, and as it grew colder it

occurred to us that we could possibly die. It happened, surely. Selfish mothers wanted the house to themselves and their children were discovered years later, frozen like mastodons in blocks of ice.

My sister Gretchen suggested that we call our father, but none of us knew his number, and he probably wouldn't have done anything anyway. He'd gone to work specifically to escape our mother, and

between the weather and her mood it could be hours, or even days, before he returned home.

"One of us should get hit by a car," I said. "That would teach the both of them." I pictured Gretchen, her life hanging by a thread as my parents paced the halls of Rex Hospital, wishing they had been more attentive. It was really the perfect solution. With her out of the way, the rest of us would be more valuable and have a bit more room to spread out. "Gretchen, go lie in the street."

"Make Amy do it," she said.

Amy, in turn, pushed it off on Tiffany, who was the youngest and had no concept of death. "It's like sleeping," we told her. "Only you get a canopy bed."

Poor Tiffany. She'd do just about anything in return for a little affection.

All you had to do was call her Tiff, and whatever you wanted was yours: her allowance, her dinner, the contents of her Easter basket. Her eagerness to please was absolute and naked. When we asked her to lie in the middle of the street, her only question was "Where?"

We chose a quiet dip between two hills, a spot where drivers were almost required to skid out of control. She took her place, this six-year-old in a butter-colored coat, and we gathered on the curb to watch. The first car to come along belonged to a neighbor, a fellow-Yankee who had outfitted his tires with chains and stopped a few feet from our sister's body. "Is that a person?" he asked.

"Well, sort of," Lisa said. She explained that we'd been locked out of our house, and, while the man appeared to accept it as a reasonable explanation, I'm pretty sure he was the one who told on us. Another car passed, and then we saw our mother, this puffy figure awkwardly negotiating the crest of the hill. She did not own a pair of pants, and her legs were buried to the calf in snow. We wanted to send her home, to kick her out of nature just as she had kicked us out of the house, but it was hard to stay angry at someone that pitiful-looking.

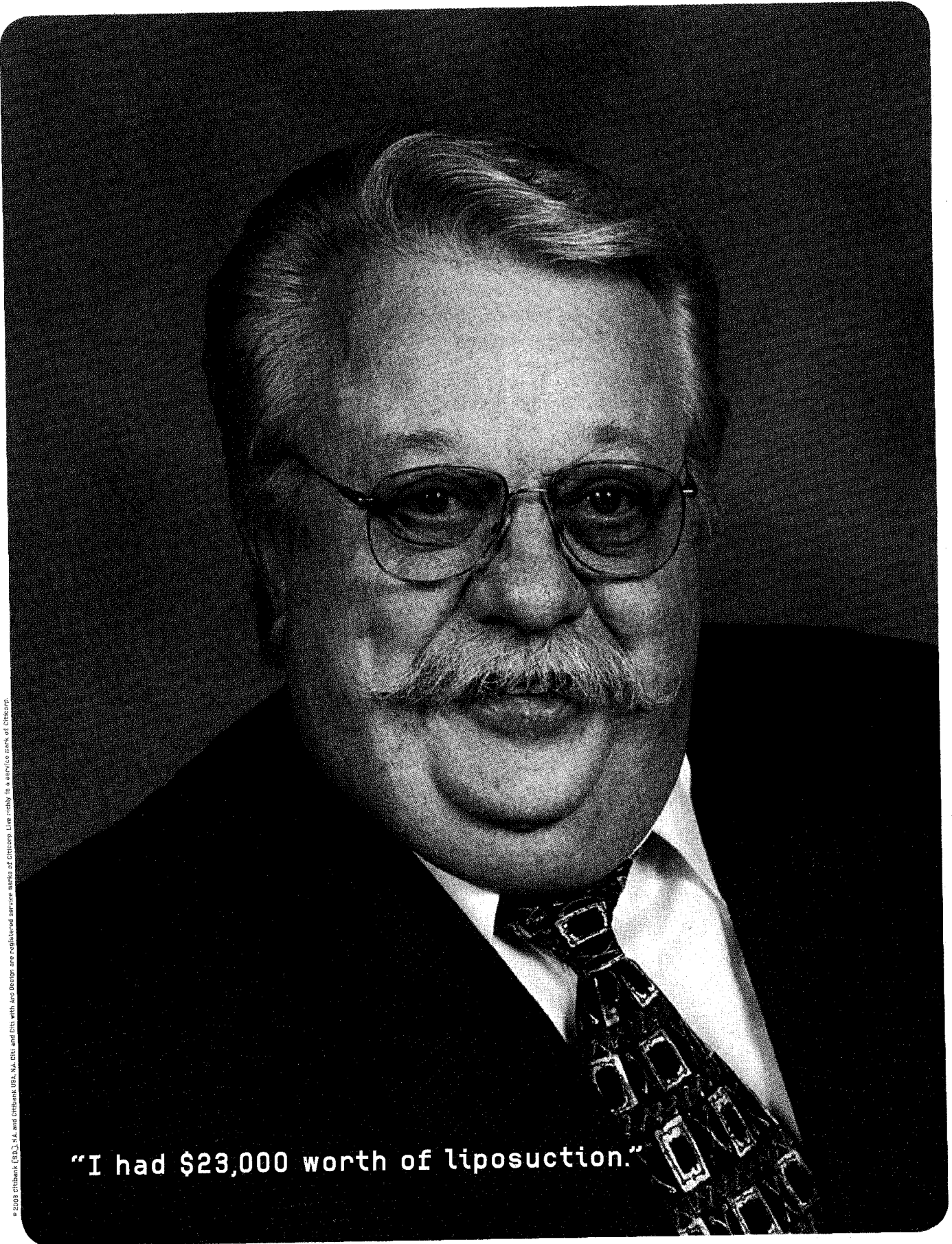
"Are you wearing your loafers?" Lisa asked, and in response our mother raised a bare foot.

"I was wearing loafers," she said. "I mean, really, it was there a second ago."

This was how things went. One moment she was locking us out of our own house and the next we were rooting around in the snow, looking for her left shoe. "Oh, forget about it," she said. "It'll turn up in a few days." Gretchen fitted her cap over my mother's foot. Lisa secured it with her scarf, and, surrounding her tightly on all sides, we made our way home.

—David Sedaris





"I had \$23,000 worth of liposuction."

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MEMOIR

CHURCH

My mother, her boyfriend, and his obsession.

BY DONALD ANTRIM

In the fall of 1988, my mother telephoned from Miami to inform me that her boyfriend, S., whom she had met in Alcoholics Anonymous, would soon be en route to New York. The reason for S.'s visit—his first since the mid-seventies, when, as a young man setting out to study painting and drawing, he'd fallen instead into drinking, and become, according to my mother, at least intermittently itinerant—was, my mother told me, to locate and, with any luck, authenticate a certain painting, a landscape that had, back when S. was an aspiring artist living in Manhattan, captivated his imagination.

"Painting? Authenticate?" I asked.

"He'll have to tell you about it. It's his trip," she told me. Then she said, "Hang on a minute," and there was a rustling sound—my mother's open hand closing over the telephone's mouthpiece—and I could hear her saying to S., in a stage whisper that revealed the faint nasality of her southern-Appalachian accent, "Go ahead and tell Don what you need to tell him. He'll listen."

S. spoke exceedingly slowly and quietly. I stood in the cramped and cluttered kitchen of the Upper East Side apartment that I shared, in those days, with my girlfriend, K. I pressed the phone re-

ceiver against my ear, and heard S.'s soft, anxious voice, a voice made, as I think of it now, almost entirely of breath, of exhalations, saying, at the excruciating rate of about one word every ten seconds—I am exaggerating in fact, though not in spirit—"Oh,

hello,

Don."

"What's up?"

"Not

much,

I

suppose."

"Mom says you're coming to New York," I said quickly, trying to use my own words the way an English bobby uses his nightstick to hurry vagrants along.

"New York . . .," he said.

And I waited.

"... Yes . . .," he went on.

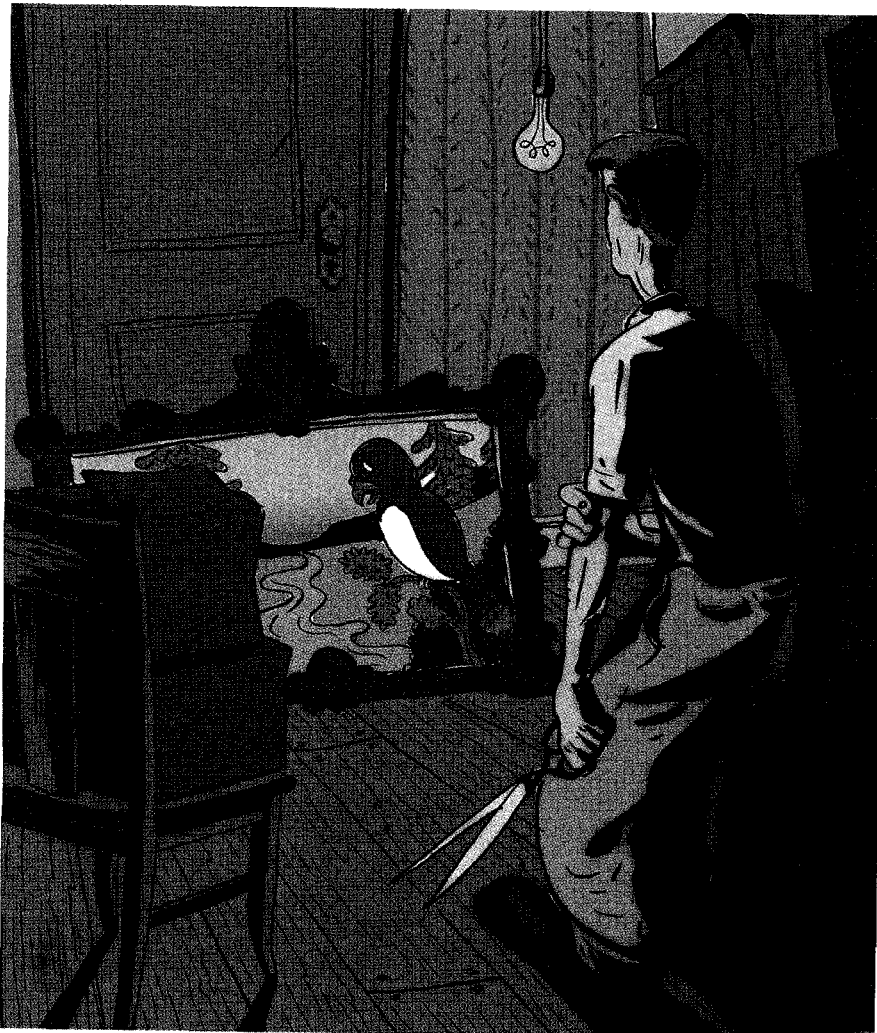
We waited. And eventually, gradually, infuriatingly, in bits and pieces, a story emerged—the story of the painting.

The painting, I learned, was old. It was rectangular in shape, maybe four feet tall and two feet wide. Its wooden frame was large and slightly ornate. As I understood things, the work belonged to—or had once belonged to—a man who owned a brownstone in Chelsea, a boarding house, a downtown building in which men came and went, living in rooms. It is possible that this man had bought the painting somewhere in Europe or America. Or maybe he had simply found it.

Slowly, over the course of many minutes, my mother's boyfriend in Miami told me that there had been another man on the scene in the downtown boarding house. For some reason, I am under the impression that this man was related to a friend of S.'s; he was, I believe, one of several cousins who at one time or another either had possession of, or claimed to know something about, the painting. Anyway, this man remembered having seen, in an art magazine, a reproduction of the work. The cousin could not recall the name or the date of the magazine or even the content of the article. In fact, all the cousin remembered with any certainty, according to S., was the fact that the painting was "important."

But in what way important? This was the question that was to become—*had* become—S.'s obsession.

ZOHAR LAZAR



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"There are 3 warrants for my arrest.
One of them involves smuggling."

For nearly fifteen years after he left New York, my mother told me, S. had wandered up and down the Eastern Seaboard, living in short-term lodgings, drinking, and working the kinds of temporary jobs—auto-body painting, sign painting, construction, and so on—that are often performed by people in his situation. At a certain point, he wound up back in Florida, where he was from, and where, after repeated attempts—in this he was like my mother; the movement from defeat to recovery was a bond between them—he had managed to get, and stay, sober. He had even begun, for the first time since dropping out of the School of Visual Arts in New York, to paint.

I have one of S.'s paintings from this period hanging on my living-room wall. Like all the works he made after joining A.A. and moving into my mother's condominium in South Miami, it is signed with his middle name, Craig. It is small, more or less the size and shape of an LP record jacket, and it is, as were many of S.'s works, a landscape. But it is not painted from life. Or is it? It shows, in the middle distance, and to the right side, a steep-sided mountain, predominantly white and lavender in color, as if overgrown with flowering plants. In the upper-left foreground (hanging down from a corner, like decorative proscenium elements) are some delicately painted leaves that look almost prehistoric; far off to the right, against the mountain and a blue-white-lavender sky, a solitary, impossibly tall and narrow palm tree seems to be growing out of an impossibly deep and wide gorge. When I look at the painting, with its strange topography, its sliver of moon in an unnatural sky, and its dizzying, off-center palm tree, I feel that there is something amiss in the relative sizes and positions of the objects. The effect is of a disturbance, either in the mind of the painter or in the world of the painting. And I feel, considering this disturbance, that the scene is missing something—a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, perhaps. Then I notice, in a way that has more to do with a feeling than an observation, the symmetry inside the disturbance, and I am aware that S., deliberately and skillfully, or maybe by accident, has painted a truly alternative world, which is to say a world that is different from ours not only by virtue of the

imaginary elements of which it is composed but also in the laws of whatever nature governs the spatial relations between those elements.

But what about the other painting, the one from S.'s days as a young artist living in New York? For S., that painting had been, during his transient years, a source of creative contemplation, and a symbol of whatever remained in him of the will to escape his circumstances and work as an artist. More to the point—and especially during the period when he was, to use an expression that is popular in A.A. rooms everywhere, hitting bottom—it had, I believe, served as a symbol, maybe *the* spiritual symbol, of his desire to live. He had thought about, and pondered over, that painting almost every day of his life as an alcoholic. When he was spraying paint on rusted cars, when he was hammering carpentry nails, when he was sitting at a bar, in New York or Florida, he thought about the painting. S. thought about the man who had first suggested the importance of the work, and about the magazine article that he had heard about but never seen; and these thoughts led him to think about European and American painting traditions, and about the history of art in general, and, I suppose, about all the famous paintings that he had seen only in books. The memory of the important painting in its huge and heavy wooden frame—not to mention a preoccupation with the thought of one day verifying his evolving ideas about the painting's provenance—had, I realized in my conversations with both S. and my mother, helped keep him alive.

"What do you think it is?" I finally asked him at some point in our phone conversation, that day in 1988.

"Well,

I

think

it's

a

da Vinci."

"A what?" I said.

"... a Leonardo da Vinci," he said.



"Put Mom on the phone, O.K.?" I said.

"Hello? Don?"

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"What's going on?"

"He believes the painting may be a Leonardo da Vinci, dear."

"I know. I heard him."

"He's going to spend a week in New York and he wants to research this and he wants to know if you'll help."

"Help?"

Which is what I did. After a fashion. When you are, as I was—and as I am—the volatile, anxious child of a volatile, childlike mother, you learn how to appear to accept, as realistic and viable, statements and opinions that are obviously ludicrous.

You may learn, too, as a defense against the absurd disappointments caused by fragile and unhappy parents, the crude art of sarcasm.

"When's he coming on this vision quest?" I asked my mother, and she filled me in on the details. A month or so later, S. took up temporary lodging with—and here the story becomes somewhat foggy—one or another of those above-mentioned cousins, the man who, following the death of the owner of the downtown boarding house in which S. had first seen the painting, now had possession of the painting. S. promptly photographed it, then took a pair of scissors and cut swatches from the spare canvas tucked away along the inside perimeter of the stretcher. This seemed to me to be an act of mutilation, or, at the very least, one of proprietary aggression, and probably out of keeping with whatever protocol might exist for the care of old art works. Were you supposed to chop up the canvas? On the other hand, what concern was it of mine? Why should I care what S. might do to some painting that was, in all likelihood, just a piece of junk sitting in an apartment?

Questions like this—any and all questions, for that matter, concerning S., my mother, and the painting—frequently became points of division between me and K. Long before any of this crazy art-historical family business ever got started, K. had learned that whenever my mother and I got involved in each other's lives, even over matters of no apparent consequence, there was likely to


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be trouble on the way for her, trouble in the form of fighting between us. In those years, I was terribly unskilled at managing the consequences of my loyalty to my mother, a person who was constitutionally incapable of staying out of her children's affairs, or of coping with what she regarded as hostile infractions—"Mom, do *you* think the painting is a Leonardo da Vinci?"—against her own liberal and open-minded world view. Thus I found myself repeatedly subjecting K. to antagonistic appraisals of my mother's cultivation of fantasy. When K. went along with my negative assessments, I turned the tables on her and rushed to my mother's defense.

S., in the meantime, was in Manhattan. He was coming full circle. I remember that he visited me and K. in our apartment on Eighty-fifth Street. I also have a memory of going with him to see the painting. What I chiefly remember about the painting now is not how it looked, precisely, but how I felt, standing next to my mother's traumatized and recovering boyfriend, a man on a mission to find a Leonardo da Vinci.

As I recall, the painting appeared dirty. It was leaning against a wall. Its carved and filigreed frame was, as S. had indicated, massive and even oppressive; it had the look of mahogany, stained to a shade of darker brown, that I have come to associate with the woodwork inside Victorian-era brownstones; the frame was about the size of a headboard for a bed.

And the painting—imprisoned, as it were, inside this boxy frame—looked somehow out of scale with itself. I should point out that at that time in my life I knew practically nothing about the history of painting, European, American, or otherwise, and that what little I know today would not qualify me to appraise a work of art. That said, the painting did not strike me as an Old Master. It did not, in fact, look like an obvious *find*, regardless of its period. In the bottom half of the picture was a rocky stream or small river that tumbled directly toward the viewer. Trees grew along the banks of the stream, and green hills sloped up and away from the center of the painting. The foreground was dominated, interestingly, by a number of tall and leafy marsh reeds; on the stalk of one sat a bird—in the dove family?—

rendered large for the sake of perspective. The sky above this nature scene was radiantly glowing, painted in an almost white shade near the horizon, and growing, with increasing altitude, darker and grayer, as if the unseen sun had barely begun to rise.

But something about those round rocks and the water cascading over them did not look right to me. The colors, I thought, seemed odd; the trees were luridly dark, and the river was sparkling and bright. The light in the painting, the light from the invisible though rising (or possibly setting) sun, originated in the background. Wouldn't that background light argue for a darker foreground river? And what about those leafy Southern Hemisphere plants? What about the single, fat songbird? Over all, the scene looked romantic in a faintly unpleasant way. It looked, I thought, off-puttingly Victorian—as did the frame. I couldn't help thinking of turn-of-the-century stained glass. I did not find the work beautiful.

And yet I have to admit that it affected me. Whenever I think about it, I am struck by a desire to see it again.

All I have to look at, though, is the photograph S. took during his stay in New York, a badly aimed, poorly lit snapshot printed on Kodak paper. I also have a few scraps of the drying canvas that S. scissored off the painting's stretcher. And I have copies of the replies written to S. by curators to whom he had sent letters of inquiry and, presumably, copies of the photograph. One letter to S., dated November 28, 1988, and sent to my mother's address in Miami, is from the Frick Collection, and it suggests that S. contact the European Paintings Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The letter is a clear blow-off. Who could blame the people at the Frick? An undiscovered Leonardo? Another letter, from the New York Public Library, proposes that S. get in touch with the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, in reference to the Leonardo da Vinci collection there. A December 9, 1988, letter

from Sotheby's indicates a lack of interest in offering the work at auction.

What was S. *doing*?

In addition to posting letters to museums, he was going to the library at the Frick Collection, on Fifth Avenue, where he spent days paging through old art books in the hope of finding a plate that matched the snapshot he carried everywhere he went. He stressed to me the value of *old* art books, reasoning that the painting—which, he theorized, had been either stolen or lost from a private collection—might have been in currency in former times. When I wondered aloud why he didn't throw the painting into a taxi and haul it straight to the Met, he made the excuse that, after all, it was not *his* painting to cart around town. Besides, he told me, he enjoyed looking through those old books in those fascinating archives, which were, I realized, a world away from suburban Miami and his life as an underemployed artist with a history of dead-end jobs.

In Miami, my mother waited for word. We spoke more and more frequently. "Have you heard any news from S. about the painting?" she'd ask me. Or I might ask her, "Have you heard any news from S. about the painting?" But I'm not sure that I ever told her, in so many words, what I thought of S. and his ideas about the painting.

"Mom, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Why doesn't he take the painting to be evaluated by someone who knows about these things?"

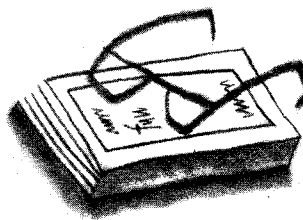
"Don, this is *his* project. I think we ought to just let him do things his way. It's important to him."

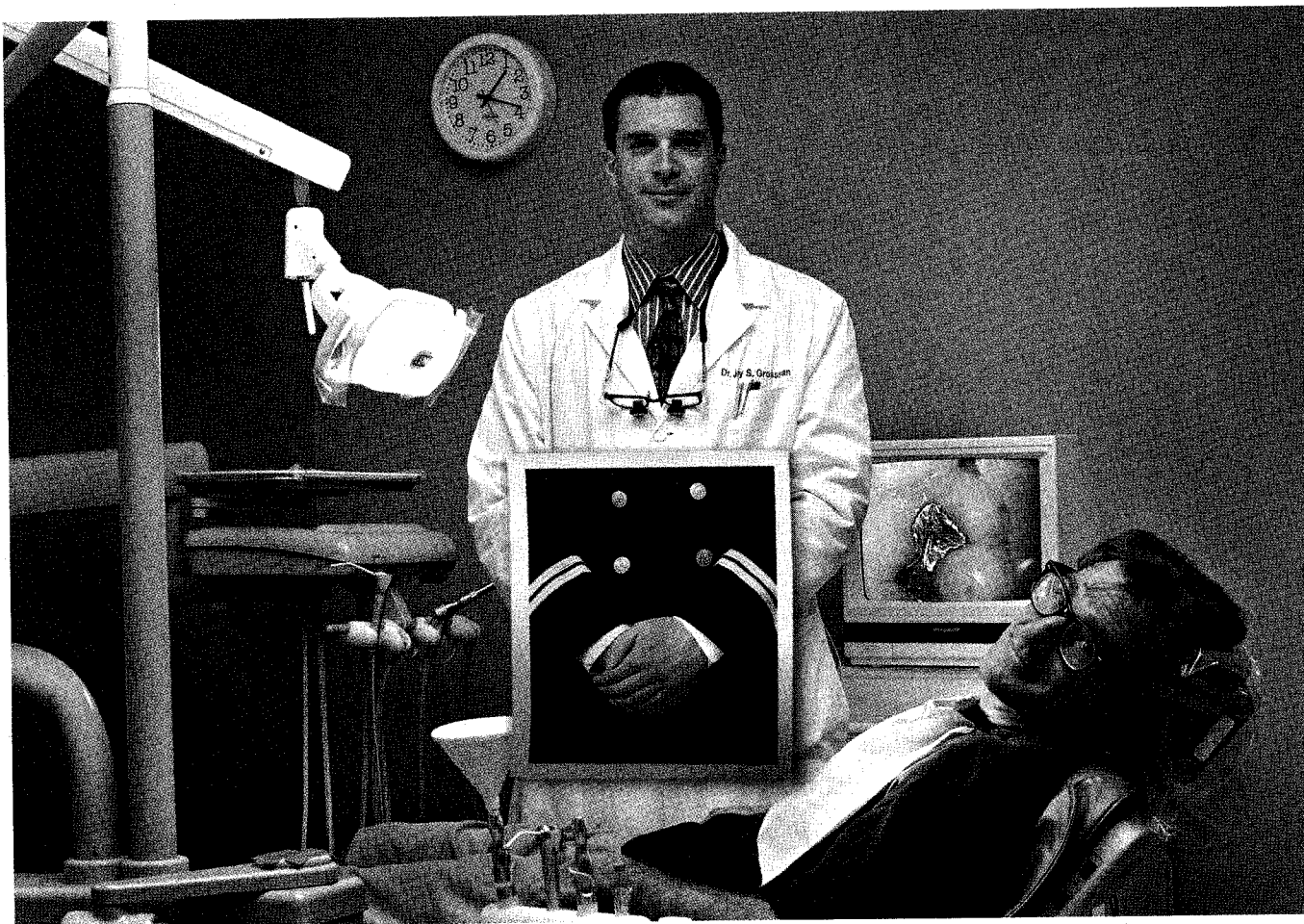
"I know that. But his way isn't very productive."

"We don't know that yet."

"Well."

"This means a lot to him, and he needs to sort it out in his own good time," she told me, and I could hear, in her voice, the serene detachment so crucial to ongoing sobriety. But I also heard—and maybe this was what that detachment was meant to hide—something that sounded a lot like fear. She was, after all, S.'s partner. She was implicated in his scheme to identify what might become, if he could prove its authenticity, one of the most famous paintings in the world. My mother, in the years after she got sober, had shown an





Dr. Jay Grossman is proud of his multidisciplined approach to dentistry – several specialties in one office to help patients avoid the complicated referral process. Dr. Grossman is also proud of his wife and three children.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

– DR. JAY GROSSMAN
UNITED STATES NAVY 1990-1991

But what Dr. Grossman finds especially rewarding is the few hours he spends each month in a program called “Homeless not Toothless.” A program he created to invite Los Angeles’ homeless citizens into the practice

for free dental care. This passion was not part of the curriculum in dental school. It came from an organization that emphasizes respect for people and commitment to a cause larger than one’s self: The United States Navy.

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alarming gullibility in matters relating to mental and spiritual health. By 1988, I had become adept at listening to her describe workshops devoted to past-life channelling, to radical forms of astrology, to speaking in dead languages.

What was her angle on the painting? Did she truly think that her boyfriend had stumbled on a Leonardo da Vinci? Or was she simply concerned about the effects on S. of what might, were he ever to actually identify the painting, come as a shattering disappointment?

And what about *me*? Why wasn't I blowing the whistle on this nonsense? Why was I going along with it, phoning museums and antiquarian booksellers and dealers, and asking them, on S.'s behalf, what a person might do, in the event that such a person might or might not know about a painting that might or might not be a missing priceless European treasure?

After a handful of humiliating phone calls, I gave up. I simply couldn't do it. I wished S. well—he had by then returned to Miami—and I asked him to keep me informed of his progress. I put the snapshots he'd given me, along with the swatches of decaying brown fabric, in a drawer. And I tried to stop thinking about the problem of the painting.

One aspect of the problem, however, had me bothered. For many years, back in the days when she was drinking, my mother (in the manner of so many high-functioning alcoholics who get a lot done) had run a college department that specialized in costume history, fashion design, and textile chemistry. She knew how to date a fabric sample. Or, if she didn't know how to do it herself, she knew how to contact people who did.

I asked her about this. "Mom, does that canvas seem to you to be about five hundred years old?"

"It's so hard to tell, Don."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you take a piece over to the University of Miami and see if anyone there can subject it to some tests?"

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"I need to respect the fact that this is not my affair."

"You don't want to find out, do you? You don't want to know!" I said to her at some point along the way.

Most likely, I was, in my steadily growing frustration with my mother, getting squared off to pick a fight with K., who, in fact, had been more than decent about this whole enterprise.

"How's your mother?" K. would sometimes ask, when she saw me stagger off the phone like a person who'd drunk from a goblet that had smoke billowing over its rim.

"They're all out of their minds! They're out of their minds! Leonardo da Vinci? Fuck me!"

"Donald, you knew it was insane."

"I know."

"So what's the surprise?"

"It's not—it's not that it's a *surprise*. It's not a surprise."

"O.K.? So?"

She had a point. Unfortunately, an understanding of reality is a liability in a situation in which reality is inadmissible—or, rather, in a situation in which people's feelings and hunches, their hungers and appetites, serve as reality. Hidden inside the unfolding narrative of the painting—a narrative not only of feelings and hunches but also of farcically grandiose hopes and dreams—was, I felt, the story of my alcoholic family. This story, now being told through the story of a moldy old painting that *might*, until shown otherwise, be a Leonardo da Vinci, was, I thought, a story in which pretty much everything that could ever happen in life—everything that could come true tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that—might, until shown otherwise, be the miraculous, transformative thing that, like a great work of art, brings us closer to salvation.

"Your *mother*," K. would say to me whenever I got off the phone. Then she would sigh.

A few years before S. undertook his pilgrimage to the art libraries of New York, I boarded a plane and flew to Miami to visit my mother. It was a trip I had been looking forward to with huge anticipation. In some ways, I suppose, I had been looking forward to this trip for much of my life. The time had come, my mother and I had agreed, for us to have a talk about our past. Specifically, she had invited me to sit at the table and tell her what it had been like, during the twenty-odd years in which she'd lived in and out of a blackout, to be her child.

It was, as I recall, the week of Thanksgiving. My grandparents were driving down from North Carolina. They, S., and I were gathering at my mother's apartment to give thanks for her relatively young sobriety, which, however insecure, had nonetheless been hard-won.

A night or two before this celebration was to take place, I sat in the dining room with S. and my mother. I suppose I must have been twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old at the time. I remember—and I should have been more savvy about these kinds of signs and portents—that the two of them sat in chairs that had been pulled out from the table and pushed hard against the dining-room wall. I, on the other hand, sat in an improvised place lacking defined coordinates—the ambiguous middle of the room. In the scene as it was set, my mother and S. were positioned like heads of state, listening, in their official capacity, to the appeals of a supplicant. But they were also a couple of nervous alcoholics with their backs to the wall, waiting to be attacked. As usual, my mother was smoking up a storm. Her ashtray, her cigarettes, her lighter, and her coffee in its bright-red mug sat close to her on the table. Somewhere in the apartment, her fluffy white cat with a skin disease was lurking.

"Don, I want you to know that I know there are things you need to say to me," she said. And I had to wonder: What was *he* doing here? She leaned forward. "You go ahead."

"Um."

"I suspect you must be upset and curious about some things."

"Yeah."

"I've got a lot of serenity in my life now, so I can hear you." She turned to S. "Isn't that right?"

"Yes,

that's

right."

"Do you have serenity, Don?" my mother asked me.

"I don't know. Maybe. Yes and no."

"That doesn't sound like serenity."

"I guess it's something I'll have to work on."

"You're angry."

I sighed. Things weren't getting off to a good start. I said to my mother, "Really, I just wanted to be able to say a few things."

"I'm listening."

"I was hoping we'd talk. About the

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way things were when Terry and I were little. When we were growing up."

But what, after all, did I want to tell her? Did I want to tell her how scary she'd looked to me when she was drunk? Did I want to tell her what it had been like to lie awake in bed at night, waiting for the house to be quiet? Or did I want to tell her that I, her son, lived every day with the fear that I would never know how to love another person? Were these the kinds of things that a man could say to his mother? Were these the kinds of things that a man could say to his recovering-alcoholic mother while her recovering-alcoholic boyfriend was sitting beside her?

I sat in my chair. They sat in their chairs. Not one of us, I think, was serene. Everywhere on the white walls of my mother's condominium were the framed Art Deco prints that my father had bought for her, fashion illustrations by

Icart and Erté, and a large series of magazine plates of the sort that had been featured in popular French publications of the early twentieth century. The plates showed women wearing improbable dresses and enormous hats, some of them walking the favored dogs of the day, borzois and other distinguished breeds. This was my mother's art. It was from a period in history, and represented a set of styles, that she loved. I now have most of it—about a dozen pieces—in my apartment in New York, wedged behind furniture, propped against walls, where it can't easily be seen. For a while, after my mother died, I tried hanging one of the Icart, a beautiful illustration of a woman undressing in a darkened bedroom. I gave it a prominent place over a low sofa in the living room. But after a while I couldn't bear to look at it. I had to take it down and put it away.

That night in Florida, the night in

the dining room, I watched my mother smoke her cigarettes and drink her coffee. Every now and then, she reached downward and made tiny come-hither motions with her hand, in the direction of the cat, which stood off in the shadows, as if uncertain whether it was safe to come all the way into the room. I had watched my mother smoke cigarettes and drink coffee my entire life. Never at night, though. At night it had been Jim Beam in a large glass.

She said to me—and I could hear, again, that nasal, southern-Appalachian sound in her voice—"Everything you want to talk about is in the past."

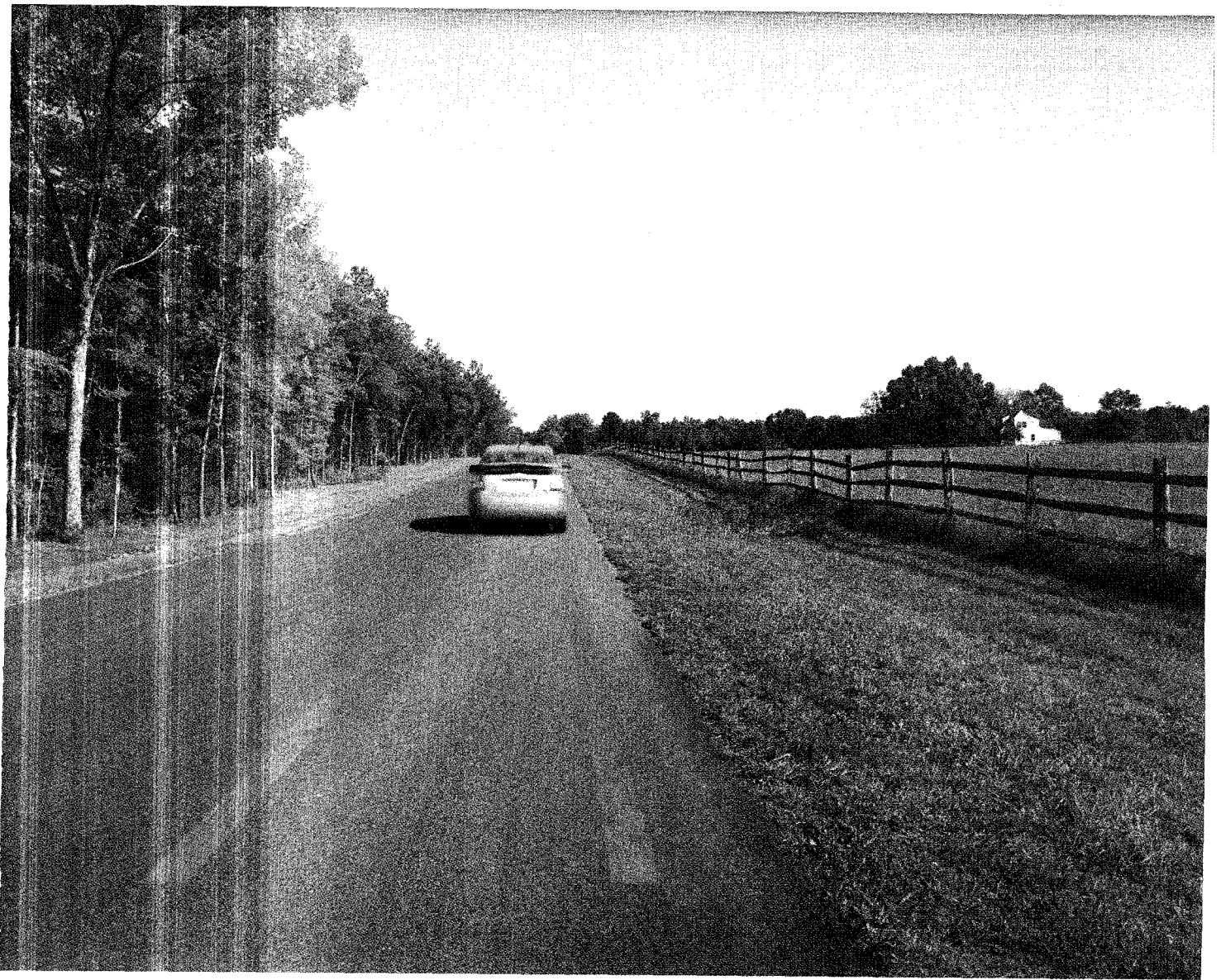
"I know."

"Why do you need to live in the past?"

"I'm not living in the past."

"You are. You live in the past. I've let the past go. I don't live in the past. I won't."

"I'm not asking you to."



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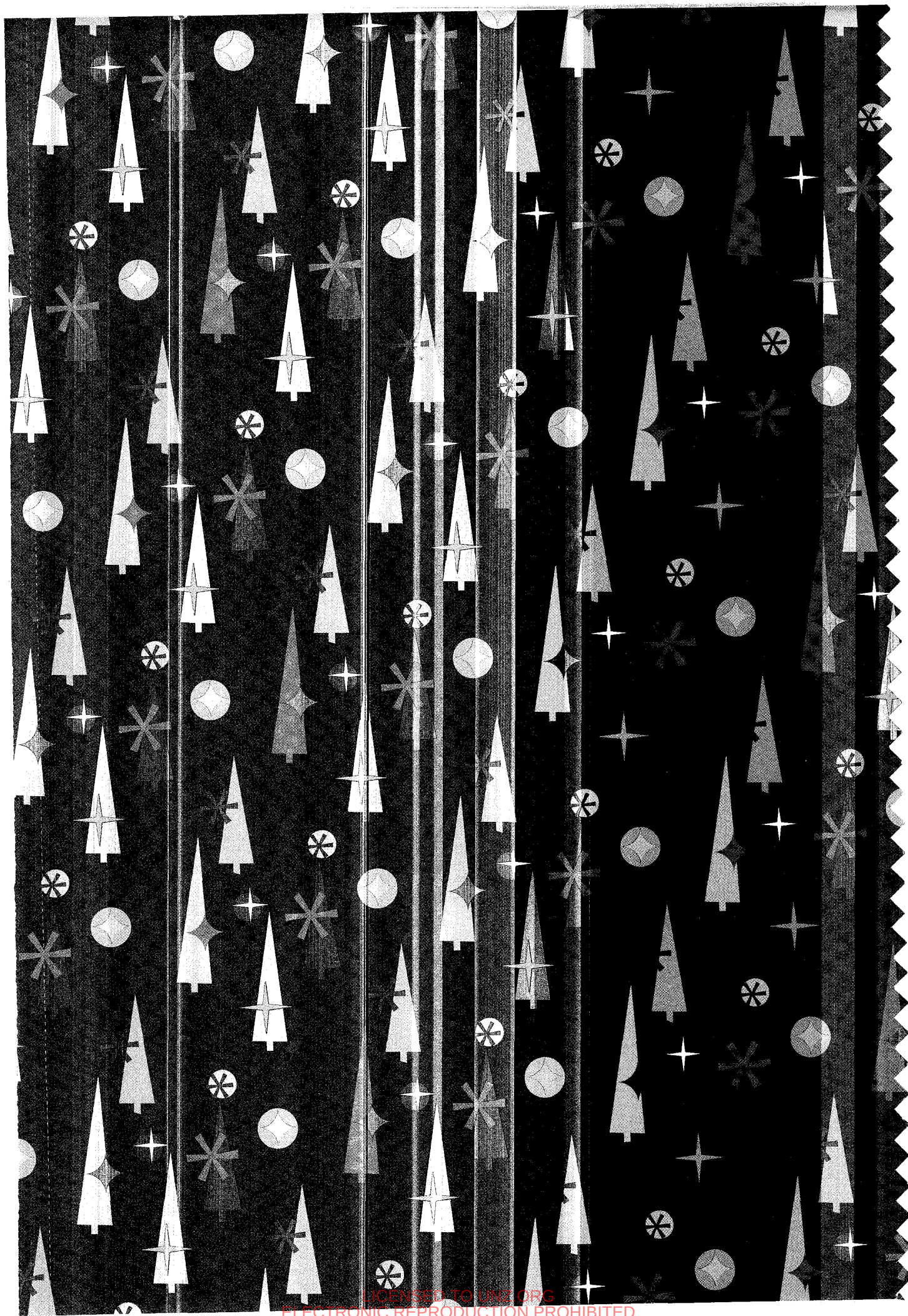
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"He says he now thinks it's a Frederick Church," I told her when, later that night, she got home from work, slammed the door to our apartment, and dumped her shoulder bag on the floor.

"Whatever," K. said, capturing perfectly, I thought, the strange and sad and true essence of everything.

And, really, that should have been that. But there was more to come.

More than a year had passed since S.'s first trip North to look at the painting. Now, in early winter, he came back. For a period of months, he lived in Manhattan, in a Chelsea boarding house, a building, as I imagine it, similar to the one where, years earlier, this story had begun. It must, for S., have been something of a homecoming. Shortly before Christmas, my mother got on a plane and flew to New York for a weeklong visit. Together, she and S. camped out in his room. There was no phone; my communication with my mother was restricted to times when she could manage to fight the winter winds and get to a pay phone on the corner. Because her circulation was bad from smoking, this was a hardship for her. Also, she was beginning to have trouble walking. During the days, S. visited galleries and museum libraries. Of course, he came up with nothing.

I had thought, I remember, that this would be a good time for my mother and K. to meet. I floated the idea to both of them. K. said she was ready to meet my mother, and my mother crowed at the thought of meeting K., whom she had spoken with on a few occasions, when I'd shoved the phone into K.'s hand and suggested that she say hello. But what was I thinking? Did I imagine that the four of us—my emphysemic mother, her passively aggressive boyfriend, my increasingly fed-up girlfriend, and I—would go out to a restaurant and order a meal together? Did I picture us sitting down like a family and talking about Leonardo da Vinci and Frederick Church? Nothing came of it. K. and my mother never met. And before I knew it my mother had packed her bags and gone home. A while later, S. was gone, too.

This time, though, he had something to show for his trouble. Of the cousins who at one time or another had, or *had* had, some connection to the painting,

two were now dead, and a third—and this was *not* the man who had read the magazine article dedicated to the important painting—had gone ahead and given the painting to S. I learned from my mother that the cousin had said to S. something along the lines of "You're the only person in the world crazy enough to give a damn about the thing. Take it."

"What is he going to do with it?" I asked my mother during one of our long-distance phone calls. This was sometime in—I'm guessing—late 1990 or early 1991.

"I don't know, Don. He says he's going to put it in fine-art storage. He says he doesn't know what else to do with it."

"Does he still believe it's a Frederick Church?"

"You'd have to ask him."

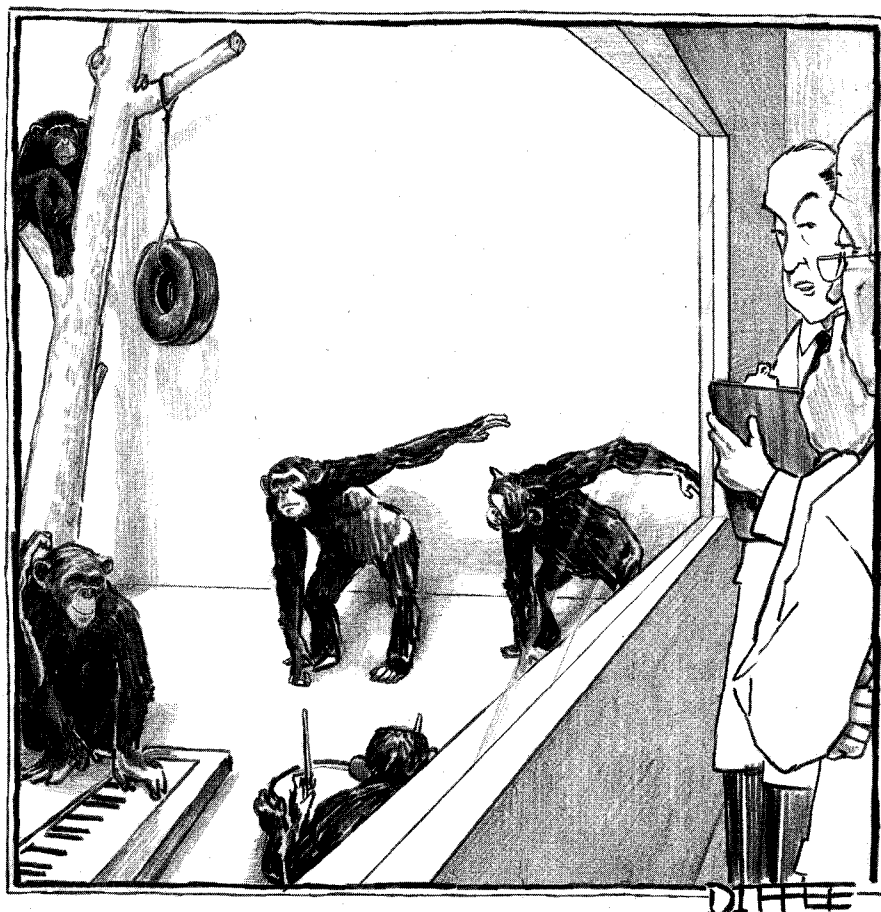
In the summer of 1991, I moved out of the apartment I shared with K., and began a period of bouncing from place to place. For a while, I lived in a small rented room. At about this time, down in Miami, S. packed up and left my mother's apartment. My mother told me later that he had begun drinking again; he wasn't, according to her, in good shape. She bumped into him every now and then at A.A. meetings—he seemed to be in and out of the program—or spoke with him on the telephone. She said, in one conversation, that he had taken a job matching house-paint colors for a paint and hardware store. On another occasion, she told me that he was working as a sign painter. She did not have an address for him, but she believed that he was living somewhere out on Miami Beach. At one point, she told me that she thought he might be sleeping in his car. In the event, S. did not, she said, look as if he were getting much to eat. He was drunk a lot, drunk even when attending A.A. He looked bad. She did not expect him to live long. She did not expect to see him around much, as time went on.

The matter of the painting was, as far as I was concerned, now dropped in earnest. One day, though, I got a phone call—yet another update—from my mother. It seemed, as I remember the story from her, that S. had gone to a bar on Miami Beach, where he fell into conversation with a pair of foreign men, or maybe it was just one man. The men,

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"Just as we suspected—they're beginning to form a boy band."

or man, claimed to have connections to art dealers abroad, perhaps in Holland. After a while, S. got up his nerve and pulled out the photograph of the painting. I had the impression, listening to my mother, that S. did not explain his ideas about the identity of the painting; rather, he dug the picture out of his wallet, handed it over, and waited for a response. The response was one of amazement. Where had S. found this picture? Had he taken it himself? Where was the painting? Had S. *seen* the painting? Did he know its whereabouts? Did he *realize* the importance of this find?

According to my mother, the men informed S. that this was, without a doubt, a work by the American painter Frederick Church. It had, she seemed to believe, belonged in a collection in Europe, and had gone missing in the early years of the century, possibly between the wars, and had been presumed destroyed. This was what she reported to me.

"Jesus!" I said to my mother that day on the phone.

"How about that?" she exclaimed, as if the matter of the painting were now settled.

I said, "Are you serious? Do you believe any of this? What's he going to do with the painting? Where is it? Is it still in *storage*? What kind of storage? One of those outdoor *sheds*? Is the shed *water-proof*, I hope? Wait a minute. Does the painting *belong* to him? Is it *insured*? Did whoever it was in the bar say anything about its *value*? What bar was it? How do we know that any of this is for real? A *Church*? I can't believe it's a Church. Shit. What else did S. say?"

"I don't know. I don't know the answers to any of your questions. All I know is what I've told you," my mother said, and I said, speaking of S., "How in the world is he going to deal with this?"

"I've told you, I don't know, Don."

"Is he living out on the Beach?"

"I think so."

"Is he drinking?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are. I am, too."

"There's nothing to be done?"

"Don, I've done everything I can do. He's in God's hands now. He's in God's hands."

In August, 1992, Hurricane Andrew struck the southern peninsular tip of Florida, with winds measured as category four. The storm tore its way through Miami, causing billions of dollars in damage. My mother's condominium was torn apart—one whole wall was effectively dismantled and removed by the winds that rushed in from the Atlantic Ocean. All across the neighborhoods in which I had lived as a teenager, streets, homes, and businesses were wrecked.

My mother told me that the storage facility in which S. had deposited his Frederick Church—I had, I realize now, come to think of the painting as belonging to S.; and, with this in mind, and on the strength of hearsay evidence transmitted through channels that I knew from long experience to be unreliable (S. and my mother), I had come to regard the painting as a genuine Church—the storage facility, as I was saying, was, according to my mother, very badly damaged. There was, I recall my mother telling me, no hope that anything would or could be left of the painting. For years, I imagined that it had been ripped to shreds. It had been swept out to sea, or blown up the coast, or drowned in the marshlands of the Everglades.

But was that true? Was the painting really gone?

Since the time of Hurricane Andrew, my mother has died. For a long time, the whereabouts of S., who disappeared from her life during her last years, were unknown to me. Throughout most of the past decade, I assumed he'd passed away.

Not long ago, I made an attempt to find S. My search led me to a former employer of his in Miami, who believed that S. was alive. But he did not know where, or how, to locate him. I asked this man whether I would want S. in my life if he was drinking. The former employer assured me that I would not.

And then—suddenly—I received a message from S., leaving a number in

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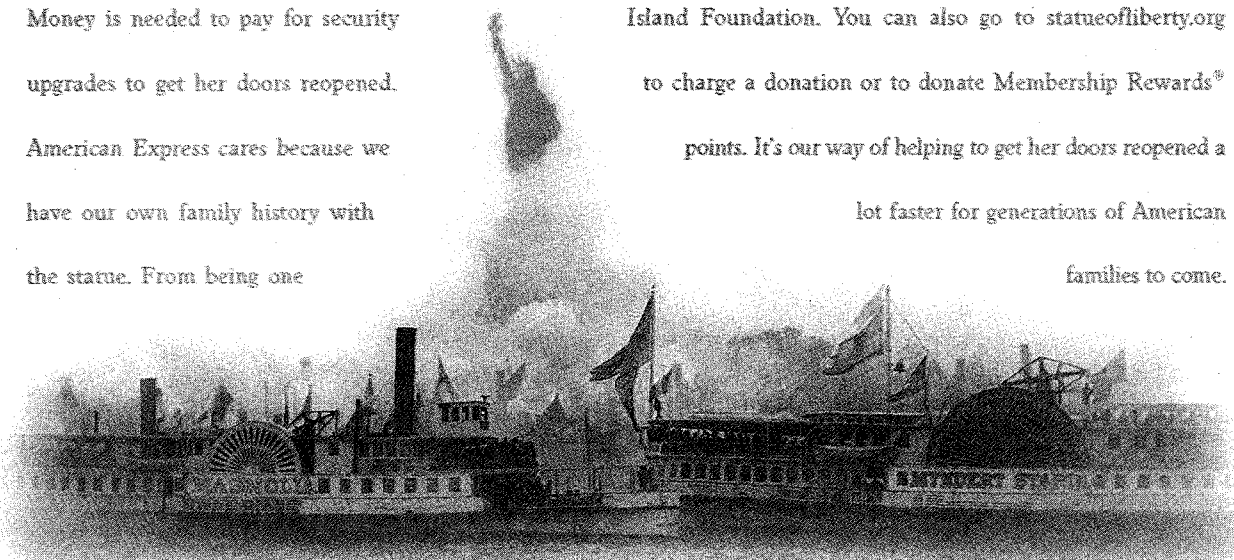
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Florida where he could be contacted. I called him, and he told me that he was getting his life together again, after thirteen years of drinking. In that time, he had moved up and down the East Coast, and had rarely had a proper mailing address or a phone. He had heard only the day before about my mother's death. We talked for a long time, remembering her, and then he set me straight on a few matters regarding the painting, which, as it turned out, had been water-damaged but not destroyed. He had given it away, he told me, to a former friend, a bartender, who, he believed, had in turn given it to his parents in Connecticut. "It had been haunting me for a quarter of a century. I figured that was enough," S. said. I noticed that his speech was less halting than it used to be, his voice firmer.

And the painting's identity? S. had indeed met, years before in a Miami bar, a Belgian whose father in Antwerp had some connection with the art business. The father in Antwerp, upon seeing S.'s photograph of the painting, had inquired into its whereabouts. According to S., the Belgians offered cash for the painting. A meeting was set up. S. told me, though, that the father in Antwerp never properly identified the painting. Something about these Belgians spooked S. The meeting didn't take place. S. was left with the feeling that the Belgians knew something they weren't saying. He told me that he even went so far as to contact the State Department about them. How my mother had decided that the painting had been definitively verified as a Church, S. could not imagine.

And there was one more thing. I had always pictured S., upon first taking possession of the painting in New York, removing it from its stretcher and carrying it in a tube on the plane to Miami. In fact, the painting had been smuggled to Florida by a stewardess, an acquaintance of S.'s, who hauled it *in its frame* on board an airplane, where, unable to cram the thing into the coat closet, she locked it, against F.A.A. regulations, in a rear lavatory. "She handed it to me at the airport," S. told me. When I asked him if he had gone back to his own art, he told me that he had. I wished him Godspeed, and we rang off.

A year ago, before I'd ever dreamed of

hearing from S. again, I went to Paris. It was the middle of winter, and unseasonably cold. As a result, I spent most of my time indoors. One place I went for warmth was the Louvre. Because of the weather, and because, I suppose, tourism had fallen off in anticipation of the war in the Middle East, the museum was unusually empty, and it was possible to march right up to the Mona Lisa. Until then, I had seen this painting only in photographs; now, standing before the real article, I was struck not only by its beauty but by its oddness. I was taken, in particular, with the way in which the landscape recedes, in balanced, serpentine patterns, behind the figure of the Mona Lisa. It is a distant landscape, green and verdant, and viewed from what appears to be an elevation; looking at the painting, it is difficult to judge, with certainty, the exact spatial relationships between the background and foreground elements. The Mona Lisa herself, though framed by this background landscape that seems to lie far away and far below—I picture her, for no good reason, sitting high on a battlement—nonetheless exists less in relation to the immediate and visible countryside than in relation to some larger, spinning world, the world of which the painted landscape is merely a small part. Thus the figure, looking toward the viewer and away from the background vista, occupies a position in the painting that is central in more ways than one, a position defined not only by the optical perspectives that control the painting as a whole but by a subtly disorienting perspective that feels, for want of a better word, spiritual. Standing in front of the Mona Lisa, I thought of S.'s landscapes—the one he'd painted, which was hanging in my living room; and the supposed Church, which at that time I thought was gone forever. In both paintings, I realized, the physical perspectives are

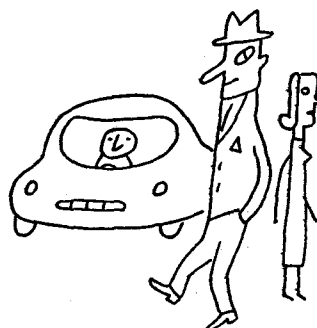
destabilizing, to the extent that the viewer is asked to communicate—visually—with the artist in a way that is not, in essence, only visual. During the years when S. was travelling to and from New York, I'd asked myself what had prompted him to consider the landscape in the giant frame a Leonardo. Of course, in asking this question I was only a question or two away from other questions, questions having to do not with paintings or with painting techniques but with the ways in which painting techniques had become the vehicles for S.'s fantasies and delusions.

But what if I had asked, instead, a different kind of question? What had S. *seen* in a Leonardo da Vinci, even in a reproduction, that had led him to imagine the world (or, at least, the world represented in paintings) as a place where even formal perspectives become wholly subjective, private creations; a place where even a realist landscape—a simple and apparently straightforward depiction of the straightforwardly known world—can utterly disorient us, and, in our momentary disorientation, cause us to see into worlds governed by laws other than those we rely on as somehow universal, worlds that are, in effect, governed by the traumas and hopes of others?

The question is not easily answered. S. loved my mother, and my mother loved S. She loved him for his spirit, as he tried to survive and to make, in his own paintings, and in his relationship with her, a world that looked like the world he longed for. She loved him in spite of, and because of, his preoccupation with da Vinci and with Church, his grand lost cause.

Recently, I showed the photograph of the painting to a friend, an art historian who specializes in a field far removed from both Leonardo da Vinci and Frederick Church. This person seemed to think that the painting in the photograph was likely not a Church. But then she said, "You know, wait a minute. Church spent time in South America, right? He painted animals and birds into his landscapes. Could this be an oil study from his time in South America? A study for a larger work?"

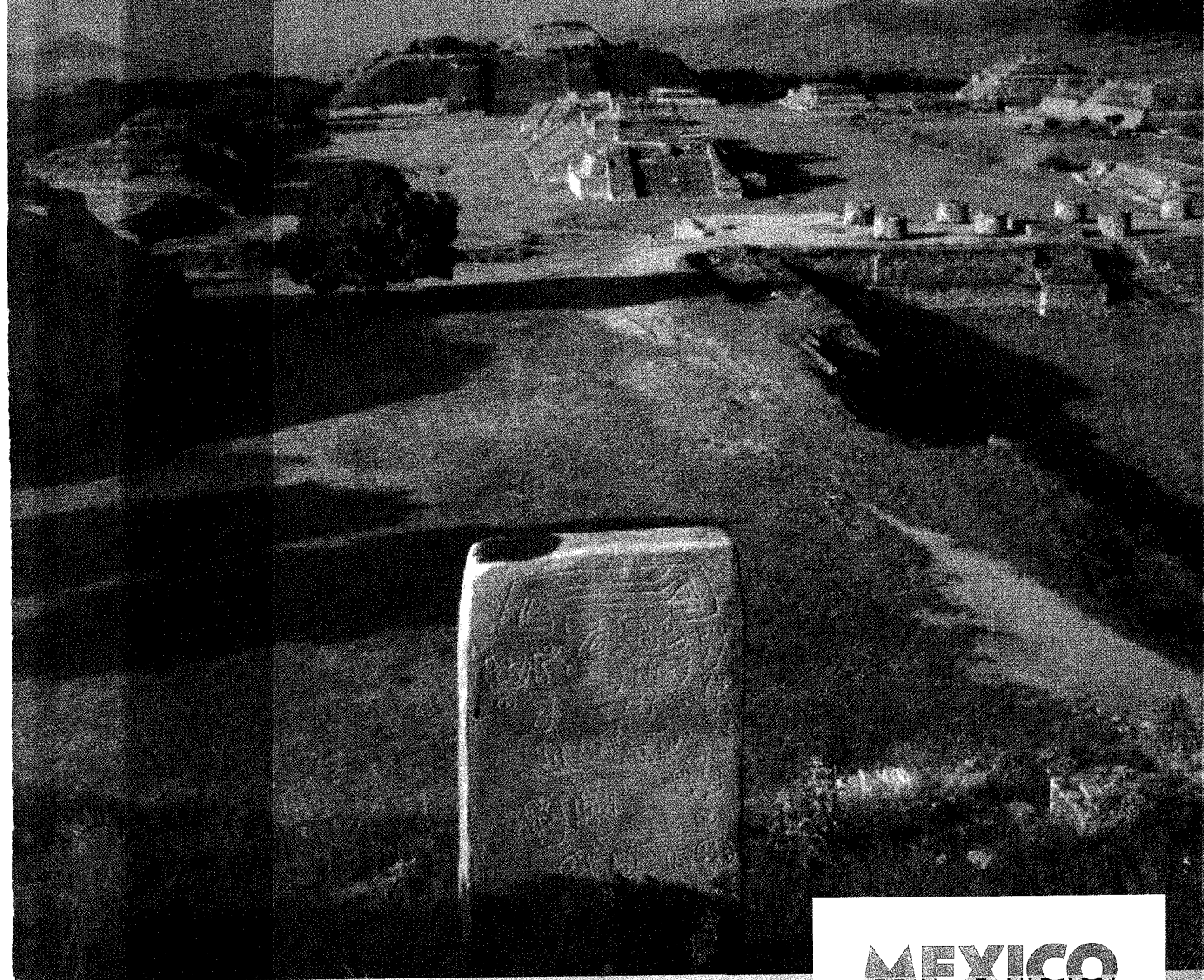
Perhaps I will pursue the matter. Or perhaps I'll wait for the phone to ring, and see what happens next. ♦





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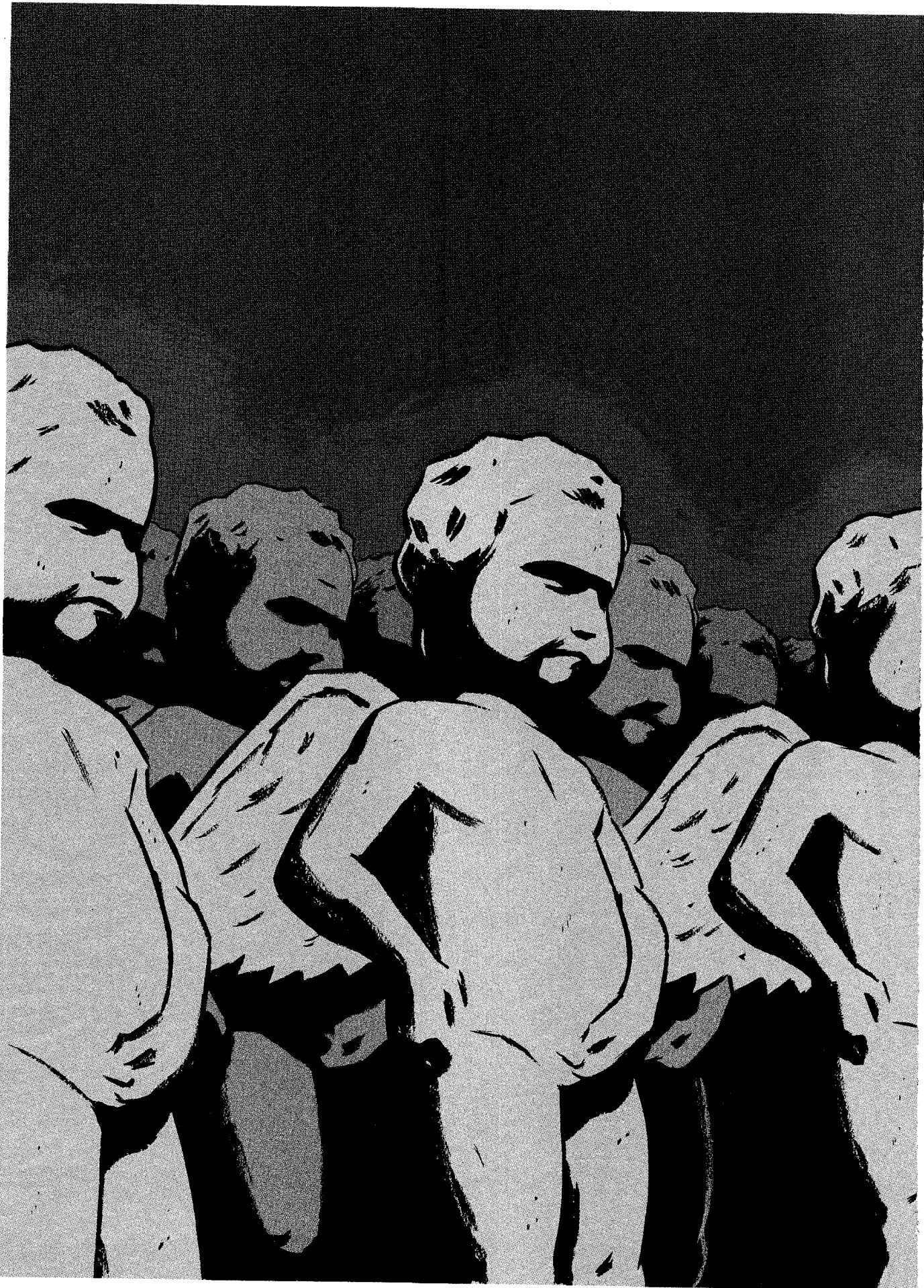
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DEBARKING

BY LORRIE MOORE



Ira had been divorced for six months and still couldn't get his wedding ring off. His finger had swelled doughily—a combination of frustrated desire, unmitigated remorse, and misdirected ambition was how he explained it. “I’m going to have to have my entire finger surgically removed,” he told his friends. The ring (supposedly gold, though now that everything he had ever received from Marilyn had been thrown into doubt, who knew?) cinched the blowsy fat of his finger, which had grown twistedly around it like a fucking happy challah. “Maybe I should cut the whole hand off and send it to her,” he said on the phone to his friend Mike, with whom he worked at the State Historical Society. “She’d understand the reference.” Ira had already ceremoniously set fire to his dove-gray wedding tux—hanging it on a tall stick in his back yard, scarecrow style, and igniting it with a Bic lighter. “That sucker went up really fast,” he gasped apologetically to the fire marshal, after the hedge caught, too—and before he was taken overnight to the local lockdown facility. “So fast. Maybe it was, I don’t know, like the residual dry-cleaning fluid.”

“You’ll remove that ring when you’re ready,” Mike said now. Mike’s job approving historical-preservation projects on old houses left him time to take a lot of lenient-parenting courses and to read all the lenient-parenting books, though he had no children himself. He did this for project-applicant-management purposes. “Here’s what you do for your depression. I’m not going to say lose yourself in charity work. I’m not going to say get some perspective by watching our country’s news every night and contemplating those worse off than yourself, those, say, who are about to be blown apart by bombs. I’m going to say this: Stop drinking, stop smoking. Eliminate coffee, sugar, dairy products. Do this for three days, then start everything back

up again. *Bam*. I guarantee you, you will be so happy.”

“I’m afraid,” Ira said softly, “that the only thing that would make me happy right now is snipping the brake cables on Marilyn’s car.”

“Spring,” Mike said helplessly, though it was still only the end of winter. “It can really hang you up the most.”

“Hey. You should write songs. Just not too often.” Ira looked at his hands. Actually, he *had* once got the ring off in a hot bath, but the sight of his finger, naked as a child’s, had terrified him and he had shoved the ring back on.

He could hear Mike sighing and casting about. Cupboard doors closed loudly. The refrigerator puckered open then whooshed shut. Ira knew that Mike and Kate had had their troubles—as the phrase went—but their marriage had always held. “I’d divorce Kate,” Mike had once confided, “but she’d kill me.”

“Look,” Mike suggested, “why don’t you come to our house Sunday for a little Lent dinner. We’re having some people by, and who knows?”

“Who knows?” Ira asked.

“Yes—who knows.”

“What’s a Lent dinner?”

“We made it up. For Lent. We didn’t really want to do Mardi Gras. Too disrespectful, given the international situation.”

“So you’re doing Lent. I’m unclear on Lent. I mean, I know what the word means to those of us of the Jewish faith. But we don’t usually commemorate these transactions with meals. Usually there’s just a lot of sighing.”

“It’s like a pre-Easter Prince of Peace dinner,” Mike said slowly. “You’re supposed to give things up for Lent. Last year, we gave up our faith and reason. This year, we’re giving up our democratic voice, our hope.”

Ira had already met most of Mike’s *goyisheh* friends. Mike himself was low-key, tolerant, self-deprecating to a fault. A

self-described “ethnic Catholic,” he once complained dejectedly about not having been cute enough to be molested by a priest. “They would just shake my hand very quickly,” he said. Mike’s friends, however, tended to be tense, intellectually earnest Protestants who drove new, metallic-hued cars and who within five minutes of light conversation could be counted on to use the phrase “strictly within the framework of.”

“Kate has a divorcée friend she’s inviting,” Mike said. “I’m not trying to fix you up. I really hate that stuff. I’m just saying come. Eat some food. It’s almost Easter season and—well, hey, we could use a Jew over here.” Mike laughed heartily.

“Yeah, I’ll reenact the whole thing for

you,” Ira said. He looked at his swollen ring finger again. “Yessirree. I’ll come over and show you all how it’s done.”

Ira’s new house—though it was in what his real-estate agent referred to as “a lovely, pedestrian neighborhood,” abutting the streets named after Presidents, and boasting instead streets named after fishing flies (Caddis, Hendrickson, Gold-Ribbed Hare’s Ear Road)—was full of slow drains, leaky gas burners, stopped-up sinks, and excellent dust for scrawling curse words. *Marilyn blows sailors*. The draftier windows Ira had duct-taped up with sheets of plastic on the inside, as instructed by Homeland Security; cold air billowed the plastic inward like sails on a ship. On a windy day it was quite

something. “Your whole house could fly away,” Mike said, looking around.

“Not really,” Ira said lightly. “But it is spinning. It’s very interesting, actually.”

The yard had already grown muddy with March and the flower beds were greening with the tiniest sprigs of stinkweed and quack grass. By June, the chemical weapons of terrorism aimed at the heartland might prove effective in weeding the garden. “This may be the sort of war I could really use!” Ira said out loud to a neighbor.

Mike and Kate’s house, on the other hand, with its perfect lines and friendly fussiness, reeking, he supposed, of historical-preservation tax credits, seemed an impossible dream to him, something plucked from a magazine article about childhood memories conjured on a deathbed. Something seen through the window by the Little Match Girl! Outside, the soffits were perfectly squared. The crocuses were like bells, and the Siberian violets like grape candies scattered in the grass. Soon their prize irises would be gorgeously crested cockatoos along the side yard. Inside, the smell of warm food almost made him weep. With his coat still on, he rushed past Kate to throw his arms around Mike, kissing him on both cheeks. “All the beautiful men must be kissed!” Ira exclaimed. After he’d got his coat off and wandered into the dining room, he toasted with the champagne that he himself had brought. There were eight guests there, most of whom he knew to *some* degree, but really that was enough. That was enough for everyone. They raised their glasses with him. “To Lent!” Ira cried. “To the final days!” And, in case that was too grim, he added, “And to the Resurrection! May it happen a little closer to home next time! Jesus Christ!” Soon he drifted back into the kitchen and, as he felt was required of him, shrieked at the pork. Then he began milling around again, apologizing for the crucifixion. “We really didn’t intend it,” he murmured. “Not really, not the killing part? We just kind of got carried away? You know how spring can get a little crazy, but, believe me, we’re all really, really sorry.”

Kate’s divorced friend was named Zora and was a pediatrician. Although no one else did, she howled with laughter, and when her face wasn’t blasted apart with it or her jaw snapping mutely open and



“Sorry, this block is closed for filming a gritty, hard-edged tale of passion and violence.”

shut like a pair of scissors (in what Ira recognized as post-divorce hysteria: "How long have you been divorced?" he later asked her. "Eleven years," she replied) Ira could see that she was very beautiful: short black hair; eyes a clear, reddish hazel, like orange pekoe tea; a strong aquiline nose; thick lashes that spiked out, wrought and black as the tines of a fire-place fork. Her body was a mixture of thin and plump, her skin lined and unlined, in that rounding-the-corner-to-fifty way. *Age and youth*, he chanted silently, *youth and age*, *sing their songs on the very same stage*. Ira was working on a modest little volume of doggerel, its tentative title "Women from Venus, Men from Penis."

Like everyone he knew, he could discern the hollowness in people's charm only when it was directed at someone other than himself. When it was directed at him, the person just seemed so totally nice. And so Zora's laughter, in conjunction with her beauty, doomed him a little, made him grateful beyond reason.

Immediately, he sent her a postcard, a photograph of newlyweds dragging empty Spam cans from the bumper of their car. He wrote: *Dear Zora, Had such fun meeting you at Mike's*. And then he wrote his phone number. He kept it simple. In courtship he had a history of mistakes, beginning at sixteen with his first girlfriend, for whom he had bought at the local head shop the coolest thing he had then ever seen in his life: a beautifully carved wooden hand with its middle finger sticking up. He himself had coveted it tremulously for a year. How could she not love it? Her contempt for it, and then for him, had left him feeling baffled and betrayed. With Marilyn, he had taken the other approach and played hard to get, which had turned their relationship into a never-ending Sadie Hawkins Day, with subsequent marriage to Sadie an inevitable ruin—a humiliating and interminable Dutch date.

But this, the Spam postcard and the note, he felt contained the correct combination of offhandedness and intent. This elusive mix—the geometric halfway point between stalker and Rip van Winkle—was important to get right in the world of middle-aged dating, he suspected, though what did he really know of this world? The whole thing seemed a kind of distant civilization, a planet of

the apings: graying, human flotsam with scorched internal landscapes mimicking the young, picking up where they had left off decades ago, if only they could recall where the hell that was. Ira had been a married man for fifteen years, a father for eight (poor little Bekka, now rudely transported between houses in a speedy, ritualistic manner resembling a hostage drop-off), only to find himself punished for an idle little nothing, nothing, nothing flirtation with a colleague, punished with his wife's full-blown affair and false business trips (credit-union conventions that never took place) and finally a petition for divorce mailed from a motel. Observing others go through them, he used to admire midlife crises, the courage and shamelessness and existential daring of them, but after he'd watched his own wife produce and star in a fabulous one of her own he found the sufferers of such crises not only self-indulgent but greedy and demented, and he wished them all weird unnatural deaths with various contraptions easily found in garages.

He received a postcard from Zora in return. It was of van Gogh's room in Arles. Beneath the clock face of the local postmark her handwriting was big but careful, some curlicuing in the "g"s and "f"s. It read, *Had such fun meeting you at Mike's*. Wasn't that precisely, word for word, what he had written to her? There was no "too," no emphasized *you*, just exactly the same words thrown back at him like some lunatic postal Ping-Pong. Either she was stupid or crazy or he was already being too hard on her. Not being hard on people—"You bark at them," Marilyn used to say—was something he was trying to work on. When he pictured Zora's lovely face, it helped his tenuous affections. She had written her phone number and signed off with a swashbuckling "Z"—as in Zorro. That was cute, he supposed. He guessed. Who knew? He had to lie down.

He had Bekka for the weekend. She sat in the living room, tuned to the Cartoon Network. Ira would sometimes watch her mesmerized face, as the cartoons flashed on the creamy screen of her skin, her eyes bright with reflected shapes caught there like holograms in marbles. He felt inadequate as her father, but he tried his best: affection, wisdom, reliability, plus not ordering pizza every

visit, though tonight he had again caved in. Last week, Bekka had said to him, "When you and Mommy were married, we always had mashed potatoes for supper. Now you're divorced and we always have spaghetti."

"Which do you like better?" he'd asked.

"Neither!" she'd shouted, summing up her distaste for everything, marriage and divorce. "I hate them both."

Tonight, he had ordered the pizza half plain cheese and half with banana peppers and jalapeños. The two of them sat together in front of "Justice League," eating slices from their respective sides. Chesty, narrow-waisted heroes in bright colors battled their enemies with righteous confidence and, of course, laser guns. Bekka finally turned to him. "Mommy says that if her boyfriend Daniel moves in I can have a dog. A dog and a bunny."

"And a bunny?" Ira said. When the family was still together, the four-year-old Bekka, new to numbers and the passage of time, used to exclaim triumphantly to her friends, "Mommy and Daddy say I can have a dog! When I turn eighteen!" There'd been no talk of bunnies. But perhaps the imminence of Easter had brought this on. He knew that Bekka loved animals. She had once, in a bath-time reverie, named her five favorite people, four of whom were dogs. The fifth was her own blue bike.

"A dog and a bunny," Bekka repeated, and Ira had to repress images of the dog with the rabbit's bloody head in its mouth.

"So, what do you think about that?" he asked cautiously, wanting to get her opinion on the whole Daniel thing.

Bekka shrugged and chewed. "Whatever," she said, her new word for "You're welcome," "Hello," "Goodbye," and "I'm only eight." "I really just don't want all his stuff there. His car already blocks our car in the driveway."

"Bummer," Ira said, his new word for "I must remain as neutral as possible" and "Your mother's a whore."

"I don't want a stepfather," Bekka said.

"Maybe he could just live on the steps," Ira said, and Bekka smirked, her mouth full of mozzarella.

"Besides," she said, "I like Larry better. He's stronger."

"Who's Larry?" Ira said, instead of "bummer."

"He's this other dude," Bekka said. She

sometimes referred to her mother as a "dudette."

"Bummer," Ira said. "Big, big bummer."

He phoned Zora four days later, so as not to seem pathetically eager. He summoned up his most confident acting. "Hi, Zora? This is Ira," he said, and then waited—narcissistically perhaps, but what else was there to say?—for her response.

"Ira?"

"Yes. Ira Milkins."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know who you are."

Ira gripped the phone and looked down at himself, suddenly finding nothing there. He seemed to have vanished from the neck down. "We met last Sunday at Mike and Kate's?" His voice quavered. If he ever actually succeeded in going out with her, he was going to have to take one of those date-rape drugs and just pass out on her couch.

"Ira? Ohhhhhhhhh—Ira. Yeah. The Jewish guy."

"Yeah, the Jew. That was me." Should he hang up now? He did not feel he could go on. But he must go on. *There* was a man of theatre for you.

"That was a nice dinner," she said.

"Yes, it was."

"I usually skip Lent completely."

"Me, too," Ira said. "It's just simpler. Who needs the fuss?"

"But sometimes I forget how reassuring and conjoining a meal with friends can be, especially at a time like this."

Ira had to think about the way she'd used "conjoining." It sounded New Age-y and Amish, both.

"But Mike and Kate run that kind of home," she went on. "It's all warmth and good-heartedness."

Ira thought about this. What other kind of home was there to run, if you were going to bother? Hard, cold, and mean: that had been his home with Marilyn, at the end. It was like those experimental monkeys with the wire-monkey moms. What did the baby monkeys know? The wire mother was all they had, all they knew in their hearts, and so they clung to it, even if it was only a coat hanger. *Mom*. So much easier to carve the word into your arm. As a child, for a fifth-grade science project, in the basement of his house he'd tried to reproduce Konrad Lorenz's imprinting experiment with baby ducks. But he had screwed up

the incubation lights and cooked the ducks right in their eggs, stinking up the basement so much that his mother had screamed at him for days. Which was a science lesson of some sort—the emotional limits of the *Homo sapiens* working Jewish mother—but it was soft science, and therefore less impressive.

"What kind of home do *you* run?" he asked.

"Home? Yeah, I mean to get to one of those. Right now, actually, I'm talking to you from a pup tent."

Oh, she was a funny one. Perhaps they would laugh and laugh their way into the sunset. "I *love* pup tents," he said. What was a pup tent, exactly? He'd forgotten.

"Actually, I have a teen-age son, so I have no idea what kind of home I have anymore. Once you have a teen-ager, everything changes."

Now there was silence. He couldn't imagine Bekka as a teen-ager. Or, rather, he could, sort of, since she often acted like one already, full of rage at the second-rate servants whom life had hired to take and bring her order.

"Well, would you like to meet for a drink?" Zora asked finally, as if she had asked it many times before, her tone a mingling of weariness and the cheery pseudo-professionalism of someone in the dully familiar position of being single and dating.

"Yes," Ira said. "That's exactly why I called."

You can't imagine the daily drudgery of routine pediatrics," Zora said, not touching her wine. "Ear infection, ear infection, ear infection. Wope. Here's an exciting one: juvenile-onset diabetes. Day after day, you have to look into the parents' eyes and repeat the same exciting thing—'There are a lot of viruses going around.' I thought about going into pediatric oncology, because when I asked other doctors why they'd gone into such a depressing field they all said, 'Because the *kids* don't get depressed.' That seemed interesting to me. And hopeful. But then when I asked doctors in the same field why they were retiring early they said they were sick of seeing kids die. The kids don't get depressed, they just die! These were my choices in med school. As an undergraduate, I took a lot of art classes and did sculpture, which I still do a little to keep those creative juices flow-

ing! But what I would really like to do now is write children's books. I look at some of those books out in the waiting room and I want to throw them in the fish tank. I think, I could do better than that. I started one about a hedgehog."

"Now, what's a hedgehog, exactly?" Ira was eyeing her full glass and his own empty one. "I get them mixed up with groundhogs and gophers."

"They're—well, what does it matter, if they're all wearing little polka-dot clothes, vests and hats and things?" she said irritably.

"I suppose," he said, now a little frightened. What was wrong with her? He did not like stressful moments in restaurants. They caused his mind to wander strangely to random thoughts, like "Why are these things called *napkins* rather than *lapkins*?" He tried to focus on the visuals, on her pumpkin-colored silk blouse, which he hesitated to compliment her on lest she think he was gay. Marilyn had threatened to call off their wedding because he had too strenuously admired the fabric of the gown she was having made; then he had shopped too long and discontentedly for his own tuxedo, failing to find just the right shade of "mourning dove," a color he had read about in a wedding magazine. "Are you homosexual?" she had asked. "You must tell me now. I won't make the same mistake my sister did."

Perhaps Zora's irritability was only job fatigue. Ira himself had creative hankerings. Though his position was with the Historical Society's human-resources office, he liked to help with the society's exhibitions, doing posters and dioramas and once even making a puppet for a little show about the state's first governor. Thank God for meaningful work! He understood those small, diaphanous artistic ambitions that overtook people and could look like nervous breakdowns.

"What happens in your hedgehog tale?" Ira asked, then settled in to finish up his dinner, eggplant parmesan that he now wished he hadn't ordered. He was coveting Zora's wodge of steak. Perhaps he had an iron deficiency. Or perhaps it was just a desire for the taste of metal and blood in his mouth. Zora, he knew, was committed to meat. While other people's cars were busy protesting the prospect of war or supporting the summoned troops, on her Honda Zora had a large bumper sticker that said, "Red meat

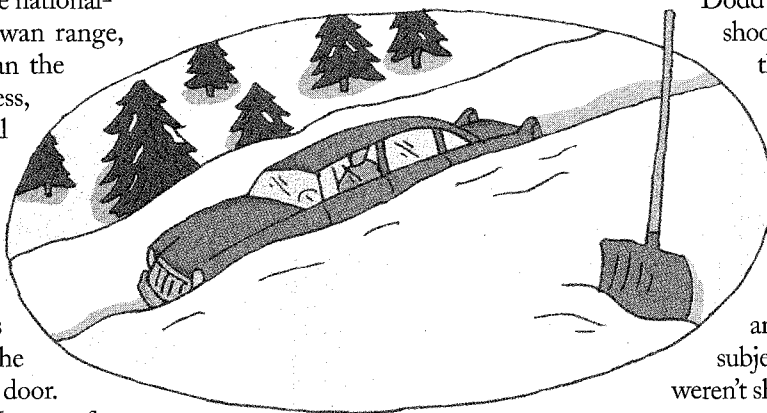
BY THE ROAD

It was the winter that Bernhard Goetz shot the four guys on the subway. The “subway vigilante,” as news stories called him, had just surrendered to police, and everybody had an opinion about what he did and whether he was wrong or right. I was living in northwest Montana, in a house on the side of the Swan Mountains, as far up as you could go before national-forest land. Past the Swan range, behind the house, began the Bob Marshall Wilderness, one of the largest national wilderness areas in the lower forty-eight states. At the foot of the mountains was the valley of the Flathead River. From clear across the valley you could see the light above our garage door.

When I moved to Montana from New York, I’d thought I was going back to some earlier and better version of America, to an Ansel Adams photograph suspended in time. Of course, Montana isn’t like that, nor (as far as I know) is anywhere else. Nowadays, the particular nuttiness of the age surges everywhere instantly, like a magnetic field. Sometimes half the drop-offs at local U-Haul rental places come from California, and whenever upheaval happens there—an earthquake, a riot—the number of refugees seems to go up. A lot of people in Montana aren’t so much living there as they are not living somewhere else.

That winter, the Bernhard Goetz winter, it really snowed. A hard snowfall makes you feel excited and cozy for only about ninety minutes, I found; after that, it becomes irritating, then worrisome, then alarming, and so on, sometimes all the way to panic. Writing, with its limitations at expressing tedium, can’t accurately convey the feeling of watching a steady, hard, unpicturesque,

windless snowfall come down for days at a time. Snow piled high on our front deck and on our roof. Sometimes the roof’s snow mass, warmed underneath by the heat it was insulating, would slide down until it met the snow heap on the deck and then freeze there, shutting off the front of the house like a security gate. The driveway to that



house was two hundred yards long and included a switchback. I kept it shovelled through the first several snowfalls, but then gave up. Getting it plowed cost more than I could afford, so my wife and I began parking our cars at a wide part of the road about a quarter mile downhill. One of our neighbors, a man named (let’s say) Len Dodd, parked his car there, too. Len Dodd had moved here from Southern California, where he had been a policeman. He had been inspired to move by various long-cultivated dislikes and resentments, combined with a general expectation of coming apocalypse. He talked about these topics in a manner that managed to be tight-lipped and loquacious at the same time. He was short and stocky, with a bristly mustache and narrow eyes, and he often wore a billed cap of a wild, vivid paisley pattern that suggested the scrambled contortions of the thoughts inside.

Len Dodd thought that the subway vigilante was great. He talked about

him often, said that Goetz had taught the punks of the world a lesson, hoped that now more people would start carrying concealed weapons on the subway, etc. I was still young enough and game enough to argue. One afternoon, we were standing by our cars for a moment before setting out on the long trudge to our houses, and Len

Dodd said that Goetz had had to shoot the guys, because they were threatening him and they were armed. I said that they weren’t “armed”; they had screwdrivers. He said that those weren’t ordinary screwdrivers, they were *sharpened* screwdrivers. I said—I had just read an article discussing the subject—that the screwdrivers weren’t sharpened. Len Dodd gave me a narrow, in-the-know look, lowered his voice, and said, “That’s not what I heard.”

I looked down the road and up it. Repeated plowings had left the snow berms so high that the tire-packed track in between was like a bobsled run with white walls taller than a person. Snow had fallen the night before, re-burdening the trees all the way to the crest of the Swans, whose topmost spruces and pines stood minutely whitened against the sky like fine-edged crystals of frost on a windowpane. The muffling of new snow added an extra hush to the woods’ usual silence, and the painfully cold air carried no smell but that of the gigantic blankness of the Bob Marshall Wilderness beyond. Not even a deer had ventured up here for months. Len Dodd’s gaze became more intense, as if to convey a hidden truth to me by mental telepathy. “Where did you hear that, Len?” I asked.

—Ian Frazier



SIPRESS

"Hastings—get rid of my lavish life style."

is not bad for you. Fuzzy, greenish-blue meat is bad for you."

"The hedgehog tale? Well," Zora began, "the hedgehog goes for a walk because he is feeling sad—it's based on a story I used to tell my son. The hedgehog goes for a walk and comes upon this strange yellow house with a sign on it that says, 'Welcome, Hedgehog: This could be your new home,' and because he's been feeling sad the thought of a new home appeals to him. So he goes in and inside is a family of alligators—well, I'll spare you the rest, but you can get the general flavor of it from that."

"I don't know about that family of alligators."

She was quiet for a minute, chewing her beautiful ruby steak. "Every family is a family of alligators," she said. (Later, she would tell him that she'd been "emotionally incested" by her father. "But you turned out so well!" Ira would exclaim. "Daughters who are close to their fathers turn into achievers," Zora said. "That's been statistically shown!")

"Alligators. Well—that's certainly one way of looking at it." Ira glanced at his watch.

"Yeah. To get back to the book. It gives me an outlet. I mean, my job's not terrible. Some of the kids are cute. But some are impossible, of course. Some

are disturbed, and some are just spoiled and ill-behaved. It's hard to know what to do. We're not allowed to hit them."

"You're not allowed to hit them?" He could see that she had now made some progress with her wine.

"I'm from Kentucky," she said.

"Ah." He drank from his water glass, stalling.

She chewed thoughtfully. Merlot was beginning to etch a ragged, scabby line in the dried skin of her bottom lip. "It's like Ireland but with more horses and guns."

"Not a lot of Jews down there." He had no idea why he said half the things he said. Perhaps this time it was because he had once been a community-based historian, digging in archives for the genealogies and iconographies of various ethnic groups, not realizing that other historians generally thought this a sentimental form of history, shedding light on nothing; and though shedding light on nothing didn't seem a bad idea to him, when it became available he had taken the human-resources job.

"Not too many," she said. "I did know an Armenian family, growing up. At least I *think* they were Armenian."

When the check came, she ignored it, as if it were some fly that had landed and would soon be taking off again. So much for feminism. Ira pulled out his state

worker's credit card and the waitress came by and whisked it away. There were, he was once told, four seven-word sentences that generally signalled the end of a relationship. The first was "I think we should see other people" (which always meant another seven-word sentence: "I am already sleeping with someone else"). The second seven-word sentence was, reputedly, "Maybe you could just leave the tip." The third was "How could you forget your wallet again?" And the fourth, the killer of all killers, was "Oh, look, I've forgotten my wallet, too!"

He did not imagine that they would ever see each other again. But when he dropped her off at her house, walking her to the door, she suddenly grabbed his face with both hands, and her mouth became its own wet creature exploring his. She opened up his jacket, pushing her body inside it, against his, the pumpkin-colored silk of her blouse rubbing on his shirt. Her lips came away in a slurp. "I'm going to call you," she said, smiling. Her eyes were wild with something, as if with gin, though she had only been drinking wine.

"O.K.," he mumbled, walking backward down her steps in the dark, his car still running, its headlights bright along her street.

The following week, he was in Zora's living room. It was beige and white with cranberry accents. On the walls were black-framed photos of her son, Bruno, at all ages. There were pictures of Bruno lying on the ground. There were pictures of Bruno and Zora together, the boy hidden in the folds of her skirt, Zora hanging her then long hair down into his face, covering him completely. There he was again, naked, leaning in between her knees like a cello. There were pictures of him in the bath, though in some he was clearly already at the start of puberty. In the corner of the room stood perhaps a dozen wooden sculptures of naked boys that Zora had carved herself. "One of my hobbies, which I was telling you about," she said. They were astounding little things. She had drilled holes in their penises with a brace-and-bit to allow for water in case she could someday sell them as garden fountains. "These are winged boys. The beautiful adolescent boy who flies away. It's from mythology. I forget what they're called. I just love their little rumps." He nodded, studying the tight,

sculpted buttocks, the spouted, mushroomy phalluses, the long backs and limbs. So: this was the sort of woman he'd been missing out on, not being single all these years. What had he been thinking of, staying married for so long?

He sat down and asked for wine. "You know, I'm just a little gun shy romantically," he said apologetically. "I don't have the confidence I used to. I don't think I can take my clothes off in front of another person. Not even at the gym, frankly. I've been changing in the toilet stalls. After divorce and all."

"Oh, divorce will do that to you totally," she said reassuringly. She poured him some wine. "It's like a trick. It's like someone puts a rug over a trapdoor and says, 'Stand there.' And so you do. Then boom." From a drawer in a china hutch, she took out a pipe, loaded it with hashish from a packet of foil, then lit it, inhaling. She gave it to him.

"I've never seen a pediatrician smoke hashish before."

"Really?" she said, with some difficulty, her breath still sucked in.

The nipples of her breasts were long, cylindrical, and stiff, so that her chest looked as if two small plungers had flown across the room and suctioned themselves there. His mouth opened hungrily to kiss them.

"Perhaps you would like to take off your shoes," she whispered.

"Oh, no," he said.

There was sex where you were looked in the eye and beautiful things were said to you and then there was what Ira used to think of as yoo-hoo sex: where the other person seemed spirited away, not quite there, their pleasure mysterious and crazy and only accidentally involving you. "Yoo-hoo?" was what his grandmother always called before entering a house where she knew people but not well enough to know whether they were actually home.

"Where *are* you?" Ira said in the dark. He decided that in a case such as this he could feel a chaste and sanctifying distance. It wasn't he who was having sex. The condom was having sex and he was just trying to stop it. Zora's candles on the nightstand were heated to clear pools in their tins. They flickered smokily. He tried not to think about how, before she had even lit them and pulled back the bedcovers, he had noticed that they were al-

ready melted down to the thickness of buttons, their wicks blackened to a crisp. It was not good to think about the previous burning of the bedroom candles of a woman who had just unzipped your pants. Besides, he was too grateful for those candles—especially with all those little wonder boys in the living room. Perhaps by candlelight his whitening chest hair would not look so white. This was what candles were made for: the sad, sexually shy, out-of-shape, middle-aged him. How had he not understood this in his marriage? Zora herself looked ageless, like a nymph, with her short hair, although once she got his glasses off she became a blur of dim and shifting shapes and might as well have been Dick Cheney or Lon Chaney or the Blob, except that she smelled good and, but for the occasional rough patch, had the satiny skin of a girl.

She let out a long, spent sigh.

"Where did you go?" he asked again anxiously.

"I've been right here, silly," she said, and pinched his hip. She lifted one of her long legs up and down outside the covers. "Did you get off?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did you get off?"

"Get off?" Someone else had asked him the same question once, when he stopped in the jetway to tie his shoe after debarking from a plane.

"Have an orgasm. With some men it's not always clear."

"Yes, thank you. I mean, it was—to me—very clear."

"You're still wearing your wedding ring," she said.

"It's stuck, I don't know why—"

"Let me get at that thing," she said, and pulled hard on his finger, but the loose skin around his knuckle bunched up and blocked the ring, abrading his hand.

"Ow," he finally said.

"Perhaps later with soap," she said. She lay back and swung her legs up in the air again.

"Do you like to dance?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she said.

"I'll bet you're a wonderful dancer."

"Not really," she said. "But I can always think of things to do."

"That's a nice trait."

"You think so?" and she leaned in and began tickling him.

"I don't think I'm ticklish," he said.

"Oh." She stopped.

"I mean, I probably am a *little*," he added, "just not a lot."

"I'd like you to meet my son," she said.

"Is he here?"

"Sure. He's under the bed. Bruny?" Oh, these funny ones were funny. "No. He's with his dad this week."

The extended families of divorce. Ira tried not to feel jealous. It was quite possible that he was not mature enough to date a divorced woman. "Tell me about his dad."

"His dad? His dad is another pediatrician, but he was really into English country dancing. Where eventually he met a lass. Alas."

Ira would put that in his book of verse. *Alas, a lass*. "I don't think anyone should dance in a way that's not just regular dancing," Ira said. "It's not normal. That's just my opinion."

"Well, he left a long time ago. He said he'd made a terrible mistake getting married. He said that he just wasn't capable of intimacy. I know that's true for some people, but I'd never actually heard anyone say it out loud about themselves."

"I know," Ira said. "Even Hitler never said that! I mean, I don't mean to compare your ex to Hitler as a leader. Only as a man."

Zora stroked his arm. "Do you feel ready to meet Bruno? I mean, he didn't care for my last boyfriend at all. That's why we broke up."

"Really?" This silenced him for a moment. "If I left those matters up to my daughter, I'd be dating a beagle."

"I believe children come first." Her voice now had a steely edge.

"Oh, yes, yes, so do I," Ira said quickly. He felt suddenly paralyzed and cold.

She reached into the nightstand drawer, took out a vial, and bit into a pill. "Here, take half," she said. "Otherwise we won't get any sleep at all. Sometimes I snore. Probably you do, too."

"This is so cute," Ira said warmly. "Our taking these pills together."

He staggered through his days, tired and unsure. At the office, he misplaced files. Sometimes he knocked things over by accident—a glass of water or the benefits manual. The buildup to war, too, was taking its toll. He lay in bed at night, the moments before sleep a kind of stark acquaintance with death. What had happened to the world? It

was mid-March now, but it still did not look like spring, especially with the plastic sheeting duct-taped to his windows. When he tried to look out, the trees seemed to be pasted onto the waxy dinge of a still wintry sky. He wished that this month shared its name with a less military verb. Why "March"? How about a month named Skip? That could work.

He got a couple of cats from the pound so that Bekka could have some live pet action at his house, too. He and Bekka went to the store and stocked up on litter and cat food.

"Provisions!" Ira exclaimed.

"In case the war comes here, we can eat the cat food," Bekka suggested.

"Cat food, heck. We can eat the cats," Ira said.

"That's disgusting, Dad."

Ira shrugged.

"You see, that's one of the things Mom didn't like about you!" she added.

"Really? She said that?"

"Sort of."

"Mom likes me. She's just very busy."

"Yeah. Whatever."

He got back to the cats. "What should we name them?"

"I don't know." She studied the cats.

Ira hated the precious literary names that people gave pets—characters from opera and Proust. When he first met Marilyn, she had a cat named Portia, but he had insisted on calling it Fang.

"I think we should name them Snowball and Snowflake," Bekka said, looking glassy-eyed at the two golden tabbies. In the pound, someone with name-tag duty had named them "Jake" and "Fake Jake," but the quotation marks around their names seemed an invitation to change them.

"They don't look like a snowball or a snowflake," Ira said, trying not to let his disappointment show. Sometimes Bekka seemed completely banal to him. She had spells of inexplicable and vapid conventionality. He had always wanted to name a cat Bowser. "How about Bowser and Bowsee?"

"Fireball and Fireflake," Bekka tried again.

Ira looked at her, he hoped, beseechingly and persuasively. "Are you *sure*? Fireball and Fireflake don't really sound like cats that would belong to you."

Bekka's face clenched tearily. "You don't know me! I only live with you part

time! The rest of the time I live with Mom, and she doesn't know me, either! The only person who knows me is me!"

"O.K., O.K.," Ira said. The cats were eying him warily. In time of war, never argue with a fireball or a fireflake. Never argue with the food. "Fireball and Fireflake."

What *were* those? Two divorced middle-aged people on a date?

"Why don't you come to dinner?" Zora phoned one afternoon. "I'm making spring spaghetti, Bruny's favorite, and you can come over and meet him. Unless you have Bekka tonight."

"What is spring spaghetti?" Ira asked.

"Oh, it's the same as regular spaghetti—you just serve it kind of lukewarm. Room temperature. With a little fresh basil."

"What should I bring?"

"Perhaps you could just bring a small appetizer and some dessert," she said. "And maybe a salad, some bread if you're close to a bakery, and a bottle of wine. Also an extra chair, if you have one. We'll need an extra chair."

"O.K.," he said.

He was a little loaded down at the door. She stepped outside, he thought to help him, but she simply put her arms around him. "I have to kiss you outside. Bruny doesn't like to see that sort of thing." She kissed Ira in a sweet, rubbery way on the mouth. Then she stepped back in, smiling, holding the door open for him. Oh, the beautiful smiles of the insane. Soon, he was sure, there would be a study that showed that the mentally ill were actually better-looking than other people. Dating proved it! The aluminum foil over his salad was sliding off, and the brownies he had made for dessert were still warm underneath the salad bowl, heating and wilting the lettuce. He attempted a familiar and proprietary stride through Zora's living room, though he felt neither, then dumped everything on her kitchen table.

"Thank you," she said, and placed her hand on the small of his back. He was deeply attracted to her. There was nothing he could do about that.

"It smells good," he said. "You smell good." Some mix of garlic and citrus and baby powder overlaid with nutmeg. Her hand wandered down and stroked his behind. "I've got to run back out to the car and get the appetizer and the chair,"

he said, and made a quick dash. When he came back in, handed her the appetizer—a dish of herbed olives (he knew nothing about food; someone at work had told him you could never go wrong with herbed olives: "Spell it out. H-e-r b-e-d. Get it?")—and then set the chair up at Zora's little dining table for two (he'd never seen one not set up for at least four), Zora looked brightly at him and whispered, "Are you ready to meet Bruny?"

Ready. He did not know precisely what she meant by that. It seemed that she had reversed everything, that she should be asking Bruno, or Bruny, if he was ready to meet *him*. "Ready," he said.

There was wavery flute-playing behind a closed door down the hallway. "Bruny?" Zora called. The music stopped. Suddenly a barking, howling voice called, "*What?*"

"Come out and meet Ira, please."

There was silence. Nobody moved at all for a very long time. Ira smiled politely. "Oh, let him play," he said.

"I'll be right back," Zora said, and she headed down the hall to Bruno's room, knocked on the door, then went in, closing it behind her. Ira stood there for a while, then he picked up the Screwpull, opened the bottle of wine, and began to drink. After several minutes, Zora returned to the kitchen, sighing, "Bruny's in a little bit of a mood." Suddenly a door slammed and soft, trudging footsteps brought Bruno, the boy himself, into the kitchen. He was barefoot and in a T-shirt and gym shorts, his legs already dark with hair. His eyebrows sprouted in a manly black V over the bridge of his nose. He was not tall but he was muscular, broad-shouldered, and thick-limbed. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall with weary belligerence.

"Bruny, this is Ira," Zora said. Ira put his wineglass down and extended his hand. Bruno unfolded his arms, but did not shake hands. Instead, he thrust out his chin and scowled. Ira picked up his wineglass again.

"Good to meet you. Your mother has said a lot of wonderful things about you."

Bruno looked at the appetizer bowl. "What's all this grassy gunk all over the olives." It was not really a question, so no one answered it. Bruno turned back to his mother. "May I go back to my room now?"

"Yes, dear," Zora said. She looked at Ira. "He's practicing for the woodwind competition next Saturday. He's very serious."

When Bruno had tramped back down to his room, Ira leaned in to kiss Zora, but she pulled away. "Bruny might hear us," she whispered.

"Let's go to a restaurant. Just you and me. My salad's no good."

"Oh, we couldn't leave Bruno here alone. He's only sixteen."

"I was working in a steel factory when I was sixteen!" Ira decided not to say. Instead, he said, "Doesn't he have friends?"

"He's between social groups right now," Zora said defensively. "It's difficult for him to find other kids who are as intellectually serious as he is."

"We'll rent him a movie," Ira said. "Excuse me, a *film*. A foreign film, since he's serious. A documentary. We'll rent him a foreign documentary!"

"We don't have a VCR."

"You don't have a VCR?" At this point, Ira found the silverware and helped set the table. When they sat down to eat, Bruno suddenly came out and joined them. The spring spaghetti was tossed in a large glass bowl with grated cheese. "Just how you like it, Brune," Zora said.

"So, Bruno. What grade are you in?"

Bruno rolled his eyes. "Tenth," he said.

"So college is a ways off," Ira said, accidentally thinking out loud.

"I guess," Bruno said.

"What classes are you taking in school, besides music?" Ira asked, after a long awkward spell.

"I don't take music," Bruno said with his mouth full. "I'm in All-State Woodwinds."

"All-State Woodwinds! Interesting! Do you take any courses like, say, American history?"

"They're studying the Amazon rain forest yet again," Zora said. "They've been studying it since preschool."

Ira slurped with morose heartiness at his wine—he had spent too much of his life wandering about in the desert of his own drool; oh, the mealtime games he had played on his own fragile mind—and some dribbled on his shirt. "For Pete's sake, look at this." He dabbed at it with his napkin and looked up at Bruno with an ingratiating grin. "Someday this could happen to you," Ira said, twinkling in Bruno's direction.

"That would never happen to me," Bruno muttered.

Ira continued dabbing at his shirt. He began thinking of his book. *Though I be your mother's beau, no rival I, no foe,*

faux foe. He loved rhymes. They were harmonious and joyous in the face of total crap.

Soon Bruno was gently tapping his foot against his mother's under the table. Zora began playfully to nudge him back, and then they were both kicking away, their energetic footsie causing them to slip in their chairs a little, while Ira pretended not to notice, cutting his salad with the edge of his fork, too frightened to look up. After a few minutes—when the footsie had stopped and Ira had exclaimed, "Great dinner, Zora!"—they all stood and cleared their places, taking the dishes into the kitchen, putting them in a messy

pile in the sink. Ira began halfheartedly to run warm water over them while Zora and Bruno, some distance behind him, jostled up against each other, ramming lightly into each other's sides. Ira glanced over his shoulder and saw Zora step back and assume a wrestler's starting stance as Bruno leaped toward her, heaving her over his shoulder, then ran into the living room, where, Ira could see, he dumped her, laughing, on the couch.

Should Ira join in? Should he leave?

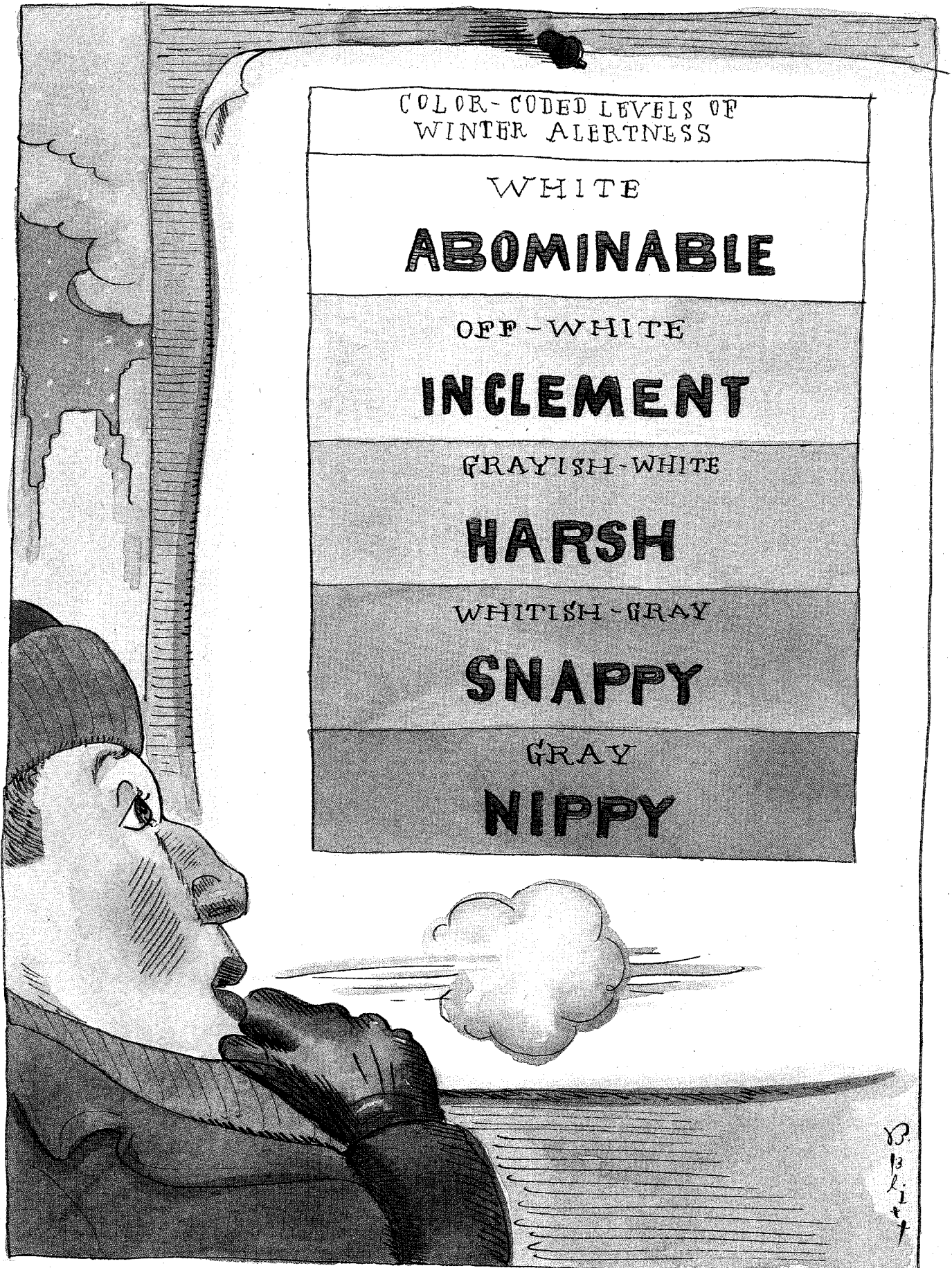
"I can still pin you, Brune, when we're on the bed," Zora said.

"Yeah, right," Bruno said.

Perhaps it was time to go. Next time,



*"No offense, but your mother couldn't fry bacon,
couldn't make toast, and couldn't heat up last week's beans, and
her famous raisin pie would make a buzzard tremble."*



Ira would bring over a VCR for Bruno and just take Zora out to eat. "Well, look at the clock! Good to meet you, Bruno," he said, shaking the kid's large limp hand. Zora stood, out of breath. She walked Ira out to his car, helping to carry his chair and salad bowl. "It was a lovely evening," Ira said. "And you are a lovely woman. And your son seems so bright and the two of you are adorable together."

Zora beamed, seemingly mute with happiness. If only Ira had known how to speak such fanciful baubles during his marriage, surely Marilyn would never have left him.

He gave Zora a quick kiss on the cheek—the heat of wrestling had heightened her beautiful nutmeg smell—then kissed her again on the neck, near her ear. Alone in his car on the way home, he thought of all the deeply wrong erotic attachments that were made in wartime, all the crazy romances cooked up quickly by the species to offset death. He turned the radio on: the news of the Middle East was so surreal and bleak that when he heard the tonnage of the bombs planned for Baghdad he could feel his jaw fall slack in astonishment. He pulled the car over, turned on the interior light, and gazed in the rearview mirror just to see what his face looked like in this particular state. He had felt his face drop in this manner once before, when he first got the divorce papers from Marilyn—now, *there* was shock and awe for you; there was *decapitation*—but he had never actually seen what he looked like this way. So. Now he knew. Not good: stunned, pale, and not all that bright. It wasn't the same as self-knowledge, but life was long and not that edifying, and one sometimes had to make do with these randomly seized tidbits.

He started up again, slowly; it was raining now, and, at a shimmeringly lit intersection of two gas stations, one Quik-Trip, and a KFC, half a dozen young people in hooded yellow slickers were holding up signs that read "Honk for Peace." Ira fell upon his horn, first bouncing his hand there, then just leaning his whole arm into it. Other cars began to do the same, and soon no one was going anywhere—a congregation of mourning doves, but honking like geese in a wild chorus of futility, windshield wipers clearing their fan-shaped spaces on the drizzled night glass. No car went anywhere for the change of two lights. For

all its stupidity and solipsism and self-consciously scenic civic grief, it was something like a gorgeous moment.

Despite Bekka's reading difficulties, despite her witless naming of the cats, Ira knew that his daughter was highly intelligent. He knew it from the time she spent lying around the house, bored and sighing, saying, "Dad? When will childhood be over?" This was a sign of genius! As were other things. Her complete imperviousness to the adult male voice, for instance. Her scrutiny of all food. With interest and hesitancy, she studied the antiwar signs that bestrewed the neighborhood lawns. "War Is Not the Path to Peace," she read slowly aloud. Then added, "Well—duh."

"War Is Not the Answer," she read on another. "Well, that doesn't make sense," she said to Ira. "War *is* the answer. It's the answer to the question 'What's George Bush going to start real soon?'"

The times Bekka stayed at his house, she woke up in the morning and told him her dreams. "I had a dream last night that I was walking with two of my friends and we met a wolf. But I made a deal with the wolf. I said, 'Don't eat me. These other two have more meat on them.' And the wolf said, 'O.K.,' and we shook on it and I got away." Or, "I had a strange dream last night that I was a bad little fairy."

She was in contact with her turmoil and with her ability to survive. How could that be anything less than emotional brilliance?

One morning she said, "I had a really scary dream. There was this tornado with a face inside? And I married it." Ira smiled. "It may sound funny to you, Dad, but it was really scary."

He stole a look at her school writing journal once and found this poem:

Time moving
Time standing still.
What is the difference?
Time standing still is the difference.

He had no idea what it meant, but he knew that it was awesome. He had given her the middle name Clio, after the Muse of history, so of course she would know very well that time standing still *was* the difference. He personally felt that he was watching history from the dimmest of backwaters—a land of beer and golf, the horizon peacefully fish-gray. With the windows covered in plastic

sheeting, he felt as if he were inside a plastic container, like a leftover, peering into the tallow fog of the world. *Time moving. Time standing still.*

The major bombing started on the first day of spring. "It's happening," Ira said into Mike's answering machine. "The whole thing is starting now."

Zora called and asked him to the movies. "Sure," Ira said. "I'd love to."

"Well, we were thinking of this Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, but Bruno would also be willing to see the Mel Gibson one." *We*. He was dating a tenth grader now. Even in tenth grade he hadn't done that. Well, he'd see what he'd missed.

They picked him up at six-forty, and, as Bruno made no move to cede the front seat, Ira sat in the back of Zora's Honda, his long legs wedged together at a diagonal, like a lady riding sidesaddle. Zora drove carefully, not like a mad hellcat at all, as for some reason he had thought she would. As a result, they were late for the Mel Gibson movie and had to make do with the Schwarzenegger. Ira thrust money at the ticket-seller—"Three, please"—and they all wordlessly went in, their computerized stubs in hand. "So you like Arnold Schwarzenegger?" Ira said to Bruno as they headed down the red-carpeted corridor.

"Not really," Bruno muttered. Bruno sat between Zora and Ira, and together they passed a small container of popcorn back and forth. Ira jumped up twice to refill it out in the lobby, a kind of relief for him from Arnold, whose line readings were less brutish than they used to be but not less brutish enough. Afterward, heading out into the parking lot, Bruno and Zora reenacted body-bouncing scenes from the film. When they reached the car, Ira was again relegated to the back seat. "Shall we go to dinner?" he called up to the front.

Both Zora and Bruno were silent.

"Shall we?" he tried again, cheerfully.

"Would you like to, Bruno?" Zora asked. "Are you hungry?"

"I don't know," Bruno said, peering gloomily out the window.

"Did you like the movie?" Ira asked.

Bruno shrugged. "I don't know."

They went to a barbecue place and got ribs and chicken. "Let me pay for this," Ira said, though Zora hadn't offered.

"Oh, O.K.," she said.

Afterward, Zora dropped Ira at the

curb, where he stood for a minute, waving, in front of his house. He watched them roll down to the end of the block and disappear around the corner. He went inside and made himself a drink with cranberry juice and rum. He turned on the TV news and watched the bombing. Night bombing, so you could not really see.

A few mornings later was the first day of a new month. The illusion of time flying, he knew, was to make people think that life could have more in it than it actually could. Time flying could make human lives seem victorious over time itself. Time flew so fast that in ways it failed to make an impact. People's lives fell between its stabbing powers like insects between raindrops. "We cheat the power of time with our very brevity!" he said aloud to Bekka, feeling confident that she would understand, but she just kept petting the cats. The house had already begun to fill with the acrid-honey smell of cat pee, though neither he nor Bekka seemed to mind. Spring! One more month and it would be May, his least favorite. Why not a month named Can? Or Must! Well, maybe not Must. Zora phoned him early, with a dour tone. "I don't know. I think we should break up," she said.

"You do?"

"Yes, I don't see that this is going anywhere. Things aren't really moving forward in any way that I can understand. And I don't think we should waste each other's time."

"Really?" Ira was dumbfounded.

"It may be fine for some, but dinner, a movie, and sex is not my idea of a relationship."

"Maybe we could eliminate the movie?" he asked desperately.

"We're adults—"

"True. I mean, we are?"

"—and what is the point, if there are clear obstacles or any unclear idea of where this is headed, of continuing? It becomes difficult to maintain faith. We've hardly begun seeing each other, I realize, but already I just don't envision us as a couple."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that." He was now sitting down in his kitchen. He could feel himself trying not to cry.

"Let's just move on," she said with gentle firmness.

KEYBOARD

A disembodied piano. The headphones allow
The one who touches the keys a solitude
Inside his music; shout and he may not turn:

Image of the soul that thinks to turn from the world.
Serpent-scaled Apollo skins the naïve musician
Alive: then Marsyas was sensitive enough

To feel the world in a touch. In Africa
The raiders with machetes to cut off hands
Might make the victim choose, "long sleeve or short."

Shahid Ali says it happened to Kashmiri weavers,
To kill the art. There are only so many stories.
The Loss. The Chosen. And even before The Journey,

The Turning: the fruit from any tree, the door
To any chamber, but this one—and the greedy soul,
Blade of the lathe. The Red Army smashed pianos,

But once they caught an S.S. man who could play.
They sat him at the piano and pulled their fingers
Across their throats to explain that they would kill him

"Really? Is that honestly what you think? I feel terrible."

"April Fool's!" she cried out into the phone.

His heart rose to his throat then sank to his colon then bobbed back up close to the surface of his rib cage where his right hand was clutching at it. Were there paddles nearby that could be applied to his chest?

"I beg your pardon?" he asked faintly.

"April Fool's," she said again, laughing. "It's April Fool's Day."

"I guess," he said, gasping a little, "I guess that's the kind of joke that gets better the longer you think about it."

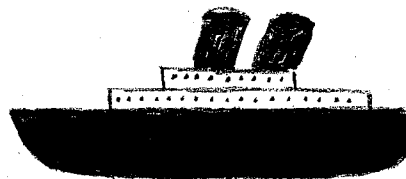
He had never been involved with the mentally ill before, but now more than ever he was convinced that there should be strong international laws against their being too physically attractive. The public's safety was at risk!

"How are you liking Zora?" Mike asked over a beer, after they'd mulled over the war and the details of Dick Cheney's tax return, which had just been printed in the paper. Why wasn't there a revolution? Was everyone too distracted with tennis and sex and tulip bulbs? Marxism in the spring lacked oomph. Ira had just hired someone to paint his house, so now on his front lawn he had two signs: "War Is Not the Answer" in blue and, on the other side of the lawn, in black and yellow, "Jenkins Painting Is the Answer."

"Oh, Zora's great." Ira paused. "Great. Just great. In fact, do you perhaps know any other single women?"

"Really?"

"Well, it's just that she might not be all that mentally *well*." He thought about the moment, just the night before, at dinner, when she'd said, "I love your mouth most when it does that odd grimace thing in the middle of sex," and then she contorted her face so hideously that Ira felt as if he'd been struck. Later in the evening, she'd said, "Watch this," and she'd taken her collapsible umbrella, placed its handle on the crotch of her pants, then pressed the button that sent it rocketing out, unfurled, like a cartoon erection. Ira



When he stopped playing, and so for sixteen hours
They drank and raped while the Nazi fingered the keys.
The great Song of the World. When he collapsed

Sobbing at the instrument they stroked his head
And blew his brains out. Cold-blooded Orpheus turns
Again to his keyboard to improvise a plaint:

Her little cries of pleasure, blah-blah, the place
Behind her ear, lilacs in rain, a sus chord,
A phrase like a moonlit moth in tentative flight,

O lost Eurydice, blah-blah. His archaic head
Kept singing after the body was torn away:
Body, old long companion, supporter—the mist

Of oranges, la-la-la, the smell of almonds,
The taste of olives, her woollen skirt. The great old
Poet said, What should we wear for the reading—necktie?

Or better no necktie, turtleneck? The head
Afloat turns toward Apollo to sing and Apollo,
The cool-eyed rainbow lizard, plies the keys.

—Robert Pinsky

did not know who or what she was, though he wanted to cut her some slack, give her a break, bestow upon her the benefit of the doubt—all those paradoxical clichés of supposed generosity, most of which he had denied his wife. He tried not to believe that the only happiness he was fated for had already occurred, had been with Bekka and Marilyn, when the three of them were together. A hike, a bike ride—he tried not to think that this crazy dream of family had shown its sweet face just long enough to torment him for the rest of his life, though scarcely long enough to sustain him through a meal. Torturing oneself with the idea of family happiness while not actually having a family, he decided, might be a fairly new circumstance in social history. People had probably not been like this a hundred years ago. He imagined an exhibit at the society. He imagined the puppets.

"Sanity's conjectural," Mike said. His brow furrowed thoughtfully. "Zora's very attractive, don't you think?"

Ira thought of her beautiful, slippery skin, the dark, sweet hair, the lithe sylph's body, the mad, hysterical laugh. She had once, though only briefly, insisted that Man Ray and Ray Charles were broth-

ers. "She is attractive," Ira said. "But you say that like it's a good thing."

"Right now," Mike said, "I feel like anything that isn't about killing people is a good thing."

"This may be about that," Ira said.

"Oh, I see. Now we're entering the callow, glib part of spring."

"She's wack, as the kids say."

Mike looked confused. "Is that like wacko?"

"Yes. But not like *Waco*—at least not yet. I would stop seeing her, but I don't seem to be able to. Especially now, with all that's happening in the world, I can't live without some intimacy, companionship, whatever you want to call it, to face down this global insanity."

"You shouldn't use people as human shields," Mike paused. "Or—I don't know—maybe you should."

"I can't let go of hope, of the illusion that something is going to come out of this romance. I'm sorry. Divorce is a trauma, believe me, I know. It's death within life! Its pain is a national secret! But that's not it. I can't let go of love. I can't live without some scrap of it. Hold my hand," Ira said. His eyes were starting to water. Once, when he was a small

child, he had got lost, and when his mother had finally found him, four blocks from home, she'd asked him if he'd been scared. "Not really," he had said, sniffing proudly. "But then my eyes just suddenly started to water."

"I beg your pardon?" Mike asked.

"I can't believe I just asked you to hold my hand," Ira said, but Mike had already taken it.

On the bright side, the hashish was good. The sleeping pills were good. He was walking slowly around the halls at work in what was a combination of serene energy and a nap. With his birthday coming up, he went to the doctor for his triannual annual physical and, having mentioned a short list of nebulous symptoms, he was given dismissive diagnoses of "benign vertigo," "pseudo gout," or perhaps "migraine aura," the names, no doubt, of rock bands. "You've got the pulse of a boy, and the mind of a boy, too," his doctor, an old golfing friend, said.

Health, Ira decided, was notional. Palm Sunday—all these *goyim* festivals were preprinted on his calendar—was his birthday, and when Zora called he blurted out that information. "It is?" she said. "You old man! Are you feeling undernooked? I'll come over Sunday and read your palm." Wasn't she cute? Damn it, she was cute. She arrived with Bruno and a chocolate cake in tow. "Happy birthday," she said. "Bruno helped me make the frosting."

"Did you, now?" he said to Bruno, patting him on the back in a brotherly embrace, which the boy attempted to duck and slide out from under.

They ordered Chinese food and talked about high school, advanced-placement courses, homeroom teachers, and James Galway (soulful mick or soulless dork, who could decide?). Zora brought out the cake. There were no candles, so Ira lit a match, stuck it upright in the frosting, and blew it out. His wish was a vague and general one of good health for Bekka. No one but her. He had put nobody else in his damn wish. Not the Iraqi people, not the G.I.s, not Mike, who had held his hand, not Zora. This kind of focussed intensity was bad for the planet.

"Shall we sit on Bruno?" Zora was laughing and backing her sweet tush into Bruno, who was now sprawled out on Ira's sofa, protesting in a grunting

way. "Come on!" she called to Ira. "Let's sit on Bruno."

Ira began making his way toward the liquor cabinet. He believed there was some bourbon in there. He would not need ice. "Would you care for some bourbon?" he called over to Zora, who was now wrestling with Bruno. She looked up at Ira and said nothing. Bruno, too, looked at him and said nothing.

Ira continued to pour. At this point, he was both drinking bourbon and eating cake. He had a pancreas like a rock. "We should probably go," Zora said. "It's a school night."

"Oh, O.K.," Ira said, swallowing. "I mean, I wish you didn't have to."

"School. What can you do? I'm going to take the rest of the cake home for Bruno's lunch tomorrow. It's his favorite."

Heat and sorrow filled Ira's face. The cake had been her only present to him. He closed his eyes and nuzzled his head into hers. "Not now," she whispered. "He gets upset."

"Oh, O.K.," he said. "I'll walk you out to the car." And there he gave her a quick hug before she walked around the car and got in on the driver's side. He stepped back onto the curb and knocked on Bruno's window to say goodbye. But the boy would not turn. He flipped his hand up, showing Ira the back of it.

"Bye! Thank you for sharing my birthday with me!" Ira called out. Where affection fell on its ass, politeness might rise to the occasion. Zora's Honda lights went on, then the engine, and then the whole vehicle flew down the street.

At the cuckoo private school to which Marilyn had years ago insisted on sending Bekka, the students and teachers were assiduously avoiding talk of the war. Bekka's class was doing finger-knitting while simultaneously discussing their hypothetical stock-market investments. The class was doing best with preferred stocks in Kraft, G.E., and G.M.; watching them move slightly every morning on the Dow Jones was also helping their little knitted scarves. It was a right-brain, left-brain thing. For this, Ira forked over nine thousand dollars a year. Not that he really cared. As long as Bekka was in a place safe from death—the alerts were moving from orange to red to orange; no information, just duct tape and bright, warm, mind-wrecking

colors—turning her into a knitting stockbroker was O.K. with him. *Exploit the system, man!* he himself used to say, in college. He could, however, no longer watch TV. He packed it up, along with the VCR, and brought the whole thing over to Zora's. "Here," he said. "This is for Bruno."

"You are so sweet," she said, and kissed his ear. Possibly he was in love with her.

"The TV's broken," Ira said to Bekka, when she came that weekend and asked about it. "It's in the shop."

"Whatever," Bekka said, pulling her scarf yarn along the floor so the cats could play.

The next time he picked Zora up to go out, she said, "Come on in. Bruno's watching a movie on your VCR."

"Does he like it? Should I say hello to him?"

Zora shrugged. "If you want."

He stepped into the house, but the TV was not in the living room. It was in Zora's bedroom, where, spread out half naked on Zora's bedspread, as Ira had been just a few days before, lay Bruno. He was watching Bergman's "The Magic Flute."

"Hi, Brune," he said. The boy said nothing, transfixed, perhaps not hearing him. Zora came in and pressed a cold glass of water against the back of Bruno's thigh.

"Yow!" Bruno cried.

"Here's your water," Zora said, walking her fingers up his legs.

Bruno took it and placed it on the floor. The singing on the same television screen that had so recently brought Ira the fiery bombing of Baghdad seemed athletic and absurd, perhaps a kind of joke. But Bruno remained riveted. "Well, enjoy the show," Ira said. He hadn't really expected to be thanked for the TV, but now actually knowing that he wouldn't be made him feel a little crestfallen.

On the way back out, Ira noticed that Zora had added two new sculptures to the collection in the living room. They were more abstract, made entirely out of old recorders and wooden flutes, but were recognizably boys, priapic with piccolos. "A flute would have been too big," Zora explained.

At the restaurant, the sound system was playing Dinah Washington singing

"For All We Know." The walls, like love, were trompe-l'oeil—walls painted like viewful windows, though only a fool wouldn't know that they were walls. The menu, like love, was full of delicate, gruesome things—cheeks, tongues, thymus glands. The candle, like love, flickered, reflected in the brass tops of the sugar bowl and the salt and pepper shakers. He tried to capture Zora's gaze, which seemed to be darting around the room. "It's so nice to be here with you," he said. She turned and fixed him with a smile, repaired him with it. She was a gentle, lovely woman. Something in him kept coming stubbornly back to that. Here they were, two lonely adults lucky to have found each other, even if it was just for the time being. But now tears were drizzling down her face. Her mouth, collecting them in its corners, was retreating into a pinch.

"Oh, no, what's the matter?" He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away to hide her eyes behind it.

"I just miss Bruno," she said.

He could feel his heart go cold, despite himself. Oh, well. Tomorrow was Easter. Much could rise from the dead. Yesterday had been "Good Friday." Was this all cultural sarcasm—like "Labor Day" or "Some Enchanted Evening"?

"Don't you think he's fine?" Ira tried to focus.

"It's just—I don't know. It's probably just me coming off my antidepressants."

"You've been on antidepressants?" he asked sympathetically.

"Yes, I was."

"You were on them when I first met you?" Perhaps he had wandered into a whole "Flowers for Algernon" thing.

"Yes, indeedly. I went on them two years ago, after my 'nervous breakdown.'" Here she raised two fingers, to do quotation marks, but all of her fingers inadvertently sprang up and her hands clawed the air.

He didn't know what he should say. "Would you like me to take you home?"

"No, no, no. Oh, maybe you should. I'm sorry. It's just I feel I have so little time with him now. He's growing up so fast. I just wish I could go back in time." She blew her nose.

"I know what you mean."

"You know, once I was listening to some friends talk about travelling in the Pacific. They left Australia early

one morning and arrived in California the evening of the day before. And I thought, I'd like to do that—keep crossing the international date line and get all the way back to when Bruno was a little boy again."

"Yeah," Ira said. "I'd like to get back to the moment where I signed my divorce agreement. I have a few changes I'd like to make."

"You'd have to bring a pen," she said strangely.

He studied her, to memorize her face. "I would never time-travel without a pen," he said.

She paused. "You look worried," she said. "You shouldn't do that with your forehead. It makes you look old." Then she began to sob.

He found her coat and drove her home and walked her to the door. Above the house, the hammered nickel of the moon gave off a murky shine. "It's a hard time in the world right now," Ira said. "It's hard on everybody. Go in and make yourself a good stiff drink. People don't drink they way they used to. That's what started this whole Iraq thing to begin with: it's a war of teetotalers. People have got to get off their wagons and high horses and—" He kissed her forehead. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said, though he knew he wouldn't.

She squeezed his arm and said, "Sleep well."

As he backed out of her driveway, he could see Bruno laid out in a shirtless stupor on Zora's bed, the TV firing its colorful fire. He could see Zora come in, sit down, cuddle close to Bruno, put her arm around him, and rest her head on his shoulder.

Ira brusquely swung the car away. Was this *his* problem? Was he too old-fashioned? He had always thought he was a modern man. He knew, for instance, how to stop and ask for directions. And he did it a lot! Of course, afterward, he would sometimes stare at the guy and say, "Who the hell told you that bullshit?"

He had his limitations.

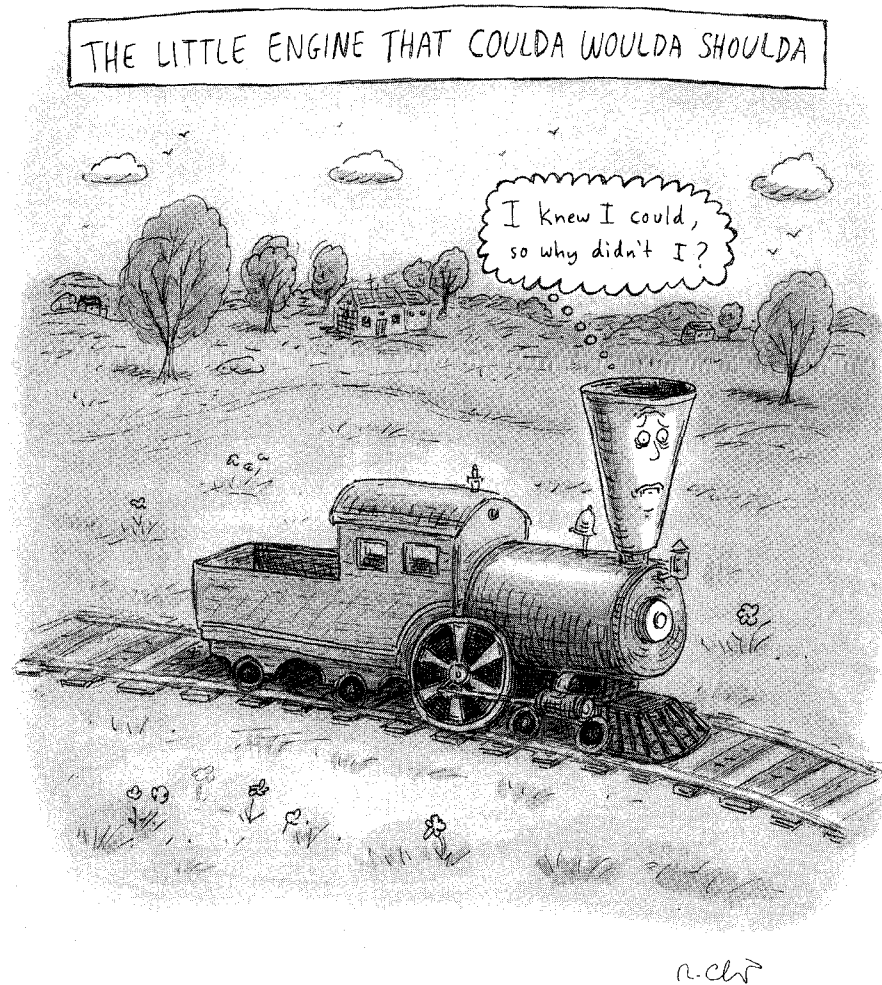
He had not gone to a single seder this week, for which he was glad. It seemed a bad time to attend a ceremony that gave thanks in any way for the slaughter of Middle-Eastern boys. He had done that last year. He headed in-

stead to the nearest bar, a dank, noisy dive called Sparky's, where he had often gone just after Marilyn left him. When he was married he never drank, but after the divorce he used to come in even in the mornings for beer, toast, and fried side meat. All his tin-pot miseries and chickenshit joys would lead him once again to Sparky's. Those half-dozen times that he had run into Marilyn at a store—this small town!—he had felt like a dog seeing its owner. Here was the person he knew best in life, squeezing an avocado and acting like she didn't see him. *Oh, here I am, oh, here I am!* But in Sparky's he knew he was safe from such unexpected encounters. He could sit alone and moan to Sparky. Some people consulted Marcus Aurelius for philosophy about the pain of existence. Ira consulted Sparky. Sparky himself didn't actually have that much to say about the pain of existence. He mostly leaned across the bar, drying a smudgy glass with a dingy towel, and said, "Choose life!" then guffawed.

"Bourbon straight up," Ira said, se-

lecting the barstool closest to the TV, from which it would be hardest to watch the war news. Or so he hoped. He let the sharp, buttery elixir of the bourbon warm his mouth, then swallowed its neat, sweet heat. He did this over and over, ordering drink after drink, until he was lit to the gills. At which point he looked up and saw that there were other people gathered at the bar, each alone on a chrome-and-vinyl stool, doing the same. "Happy Easter," Ira said to them, lifting his glass with his left hand, the one with the wedding ring still jammed on. "The dead are risen! The damages will be mitigated! The Messiah is back among us squeezing the flesh—that nap went by quickly, eh? May all the dead arise! No one has really been killed at all—O.K., God looked away for a second to watch some 'I Love Lucy' re-runs, but he is back now. Nothing has been lost. All is restored. He watching over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps!"

"Somebody slap that guy," said the man in the blue shirt down at the end. ♦



EXTRA

BY YIYUN LI

Granny Lin walks down the street on a November afternoon with a stainless-steel lunch pail in her hand. Inside the lunch pail is an official certificate from her working unit. "Hereby we confirm Comrade Lin Mei is honorably retired from the Beijing Red Star Garment Factory," the certificate says in bright gold characters.

It does not say that the Red Star Garment Factory has gone bankrupt or that, being honorably retired, Granny Lin will not receive her pension. Of course it does not provide such information, for these facts are simply not true. "Bankrupt" is the wrong word for a state-owned industry. "Internal reorganization" is what has been kindly omitted from the certificate. And, mind this, Granny Lin's pension is being withheld only temporarily. For how long, the factory has no further information to offer.

"There is always a road when you get into the mountain," Auntie Wang, Granny Lin's neighbor, says to her upon being informed of Granny Lin's situation.

"And there is a Toyota wherever there is a road." The second line of the Toyota commercial slips out before Granny Lin realizes it.

"There you go, Granny Lin. I know you are an optimistic person. Stay positive and you will find your Toyota."

But where on earth can she find a way to replenish her dwindling savings? For a few days, Granny Lin adds, subtracts, and divides, and she decides that her savings will run out in a year—in two years if she can skip a meal here and there, go to bed right after sunset, and stay bundled up so that she does not have to feed the insatiable stove extra coal through the long winter of northern China.

"Don't worry," Auntie Wang says the next time they meet at the market, looking down at the single radish Granny Lin has bought for her dinner, as plump as a Buddha, dwelling between her two palms. "You can always find someone and get married."

"Get married?" Granny Lin says, and blushes.

"Don't be so conservative, Granny Lin," Auntie Wang says. "How old are you?"

"Fifty-one."

"You're even younger than I am! I'm fifty-eight, but I'm not as old-fashioned as you. You know what? Young people no longer have a monopoly on marriage."

"Don't make me a clown," Granny Lin says.

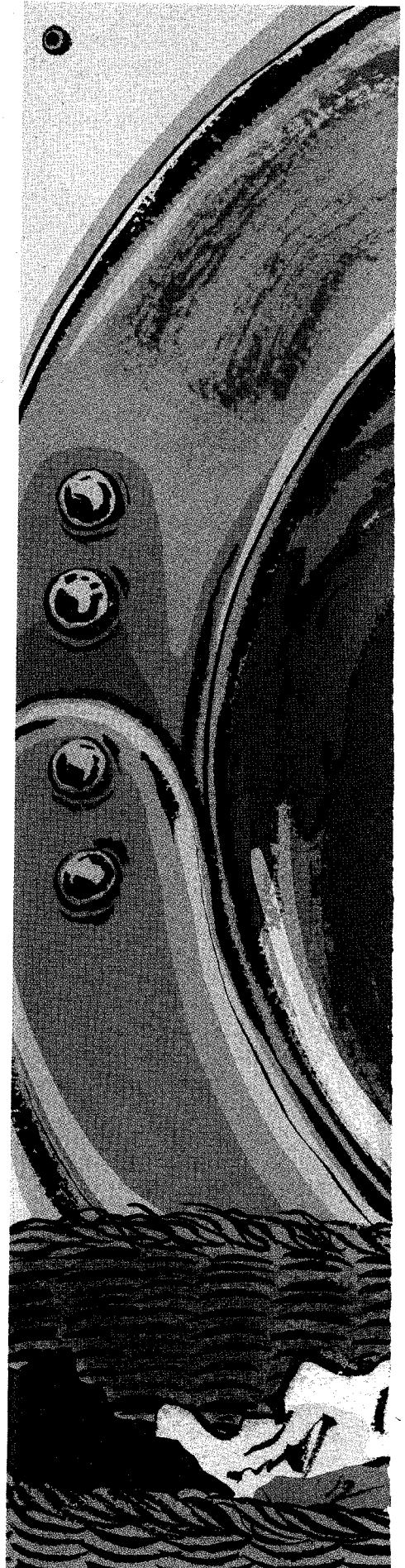
"I'm serious, Granny Lin. There are so many old widowers in the city. I'm sure there are rich and sick ones who need someone to take care of them."

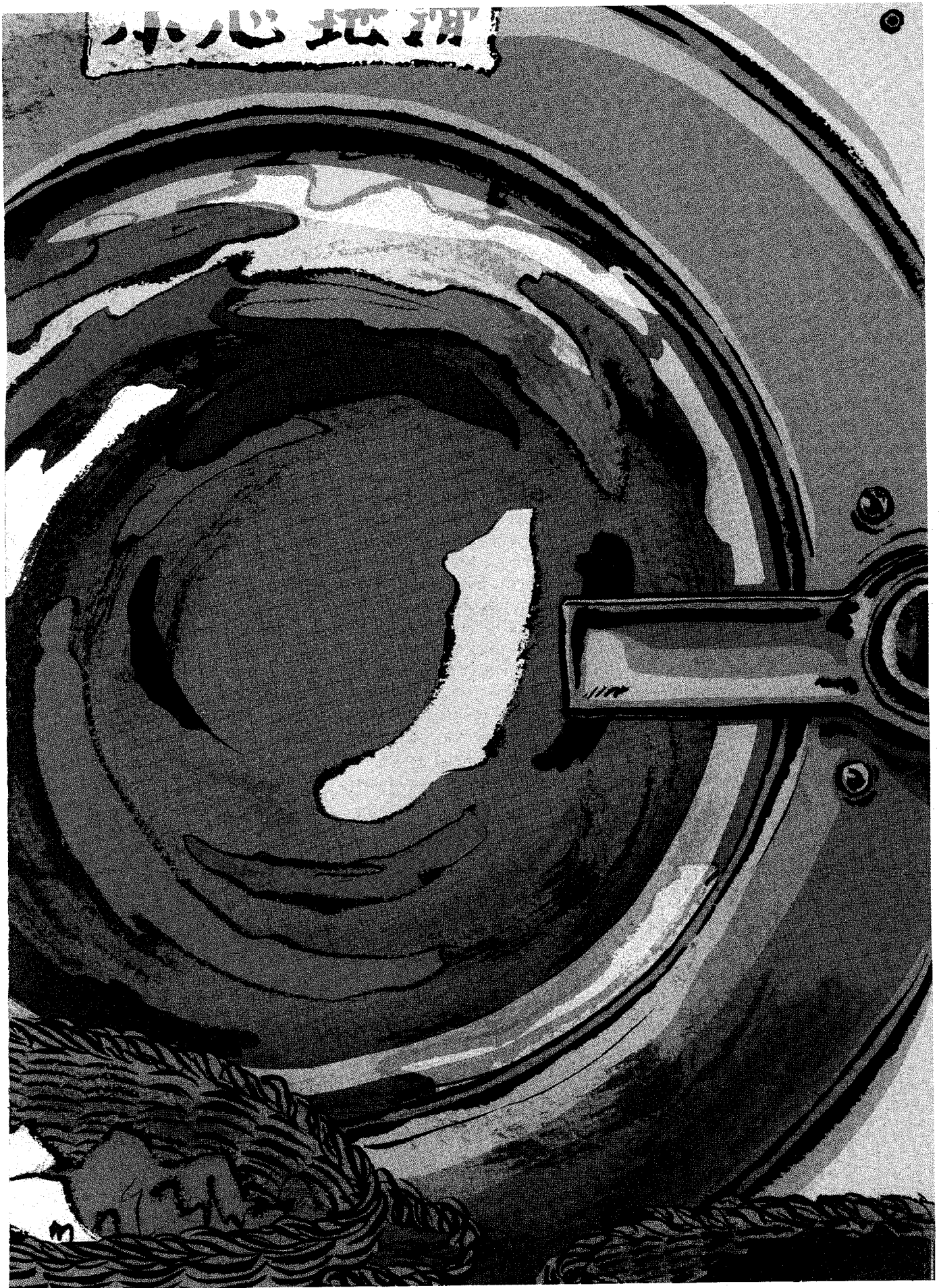
"You mean I can find a caretaker's position for old people?" Granny Lin asks.

Auntie Wang sighs and pokes Granny Lin's forehead with a finger. "Use your brain. Not a caretaker but a wife. That way, you can at least inherit some cash when your husband dies."

Granny Lin gasps. She has never had a husband in her life, and the prospect of a dead husband frightens her. Yet Auntie Wang makes the decision for her right then and there, between two fish stands, and in a short time she finds Granny Lin a match.

"Seventy-six. High blood pressure and diabetes. Wife just died. Living alone in a three-bedroom flat. Pension two thousand yuan a month. Both sons married and earning good money in the government," Auntie Wang says, and is surprised that Granny Lin remains unimpressed. "Come on, Granny Lin, where else will you find such a good husband? The old man will die in no time, and the sons are so rich they won't mind sparing some of his savings for you. Let me tell you, this is the most eligible family, as far as I know. Their doorsill has been worn away by the feet of the matchmakers. But, of all the possible wives, they are interested only in you. Why? Because you have never married and you have no children. By the way, Granny Lin, how come you aren't





married? You never told us the reason."

Granny Lin opens and then closes her mouth. "It just happens," she says.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. Anyway, they don't want someone who has a litter of children and grandchildren. I wouldn't trust such a stepmother, either. Who can guarantee that she won't steal from the old man for her children? But you are the best. I have told them that, were there one honest person left on earth, it would be you, Granny Lin. What are you hesitating for?"

"Why don't they hire someone to take care of him?" Granny Lin asks, thinking of the two sons who will soon become her stepchildren. "Won't it be cheaper in the long run?"

"Do you not know what those young girls from the nanny market are like? They are lazy, and they steal money—husbands, too, if they are hired by young couples. They leave the old people sitting in their own shit all day long. To hire such a girl? Ugh. It would only push him to death quicker."

Granny Lin has to agree that, indeed, an older woman as a wife is a wise choice. Accompanied by Auntie Wang, Granny Lin goes to the interview with the two sons and their wives. An hour of questioning later, the two sons exchange a look, and ask if Granny Lin needs some time to consider the marriage offer. Not having much to think about, she moves into her new home in a week. Her hus-

band, Old Tang, is sicker than she thought. "Alzheimer's," a daughter-in-law tells her at their wedding dinner.

Granny Lin nods, not knowing what the disease is but guessing that it has something to do with the brain. She supports her husband with both hands and leads him to the table, sitting him down and wiping the drool from his chin.

Granny Lin becomes a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. She no longer remembers in what year of her life people started to call her Granny Lin instead of Auntie Lin; unmarried women, people believe, age faster. It does not matter anymore, because now she feels quite qualified for her name.

Every week, one of the sons stops by and checks on Old Tang, leaving enough money for the next week. Old Tang is a quiet man, sitting in his chair by the window, immersed in his bottomless silence. Once in a while, he asks Granny Lin about his wife, and, as instructed by the two sons, Granny Lin replies that the wife is improving in the hospital and will be home in no time. But before she replies Old Tang seems to have forgotten his question, and goes back to his meditation without any sign of having heard her. She waits for more questions that never come, and eventually gives up. She turns up the volume of the television, and shuffles around the house, sweeping and dusting and wiping and washing, but the time ar-

rives earlier each day when she finishes the housework. Then she sits down on the couch and watches the daytime soap operas. Unlike the twelve-inch television Granny Lin used to own, which required her to make a trip across the room every time she needed to change channels (altogether she got six channels through the antenna made of two steel chopsticks), Old Tang's set is a monster with scores of channels, which all obey a small remote control. Dazed by the choices she has, and by the ease of moving from one selection to another, Granny Lin soon finds that the machine does her no good. No matter what program she is watching, there is always the nagging worry that she is missing a more interesting one. Several days into her new life, Granny Lin is stunned to discover that she is no longer addicted to television, as she has been for the past ten years. Does marriage have such revolutionary power that a long-established habit can be overthrown in such a short time?

Granny Lin sighs and clicks off the television. Old Tang does not notice the silence flooding the room. She realizes then that the television is not to blame. It is because of Old Tang's presence that she cannot focus. She picks up a magazine and peeks at Old Tang from behind the pages. Ten minutes grows into twenty minutes, and she continues looking at him as he insists on not meeting her gaze. She has an odd suspicion that Old Tang is not ill. He knows she is there, and he is observing her secretly. He knows that his wife of fifty-four years has left him for good and that she is his new wife, but he refuses to acknowledge her. He pretends to have lost his mind and expects her to play along as if she were a hired caretaker. But Granny Lin decides not to concede. He is her husband; she is his wife. Their marriage certificate is secure under her pillow. If Old Tang is testing her patience, she is ready to prove it to him; it is a tug-of-war that Granny Lin is determined to win. She puts down the magazine and looks boldly into Old Tang's face, trying to outstare him. Minutes grow into an hour, and all of a sudden Granny Lin awakens in a dread that she, too, is losing her mind. She drags her body off the couch and stretches, feeling the small cracking of her arthritic joints. She looks down at Old Tang, and he is still a statue. Indeed, he is a sick man, she thinks, and



"I'm looking for something I can read while stuffed into the trunk of an El Dorado."

feels the shame of having cast rootless doubt on him, a man as defenseless as a newborn baby. She walks to the kitchen quickly and comes back with a glass of milk. "Milk time," she says, patting Old Tang's cheek until he starts to swallow.

Three times a day, Granny Lin gives Old Tang an insulin shot. Only then does she catch a glimpse of the life left in him, the small flinch of the muscle when she pushes the needle into his arm. Sometimes a small bead of blood appears after she draws the needle out, and she wipes it away with her fingertip instead of a cotton ball, entranced by the strange sensation that his blood is seeping into her body.



*"When I said I didn't want a bunch of yes-men,
I didn't mean I wanted a bunch of no-men."*

Several times a day Granny Lin bathes Old Tang: in the morning and before bedtime, and whenever he wets or dirties himself. The private bathroom is what Granny Lin likes best about her marriage. All her life she has used public bathrooms, fighting with other slippery bodies for the lukewarm water drizzling from the rusty showers. Now that she has a bathroom all to herself, she never misses a chance to use it.

Old Tang is the only man Granny Lin has seen fully naked. The first time she undressed him, she could not help stealing a look at the penis, nestled in a thinning bush. She wondered what it had looked like in its younger years, but right away chased the unclean thought from her mind. The frail nakedness filled her heart with a tenderness she had never experienced, and she has since tended his body with motherly hands.

One evening in late February, Granny Lin leads Old Tang to the plastic chair in the middle of the bathroom. She unbuttons his pajamas and he bends his arms at her guidance, his head resting on her shoulder blade. She removes the showerhead from its hook and sprays warm water on his body, putting one hand on his forehead so that the water does not get into his eyes.

Granny Lin is squatting on the floor and massaging Old Tang's legs when he touches her shoulder with his palm. She looks up and he is gazing into her eyes. She gives a cry and backs away from him.

"Who are you?" Old Tang says.

"Is it you, Old Tang?" Granny Lin asks.

"Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I live here," Granny Lin says. She sees an unnatural lucidity in Old Tang's eyes, and feels her heart fall. Such a moment of clarity happens only before a nearing death. Granny Lin had seen the same light two years earlier in her father's eyes, hours before he passed away. She thinks of rushing out to call a doctor, but her feet are locked to the floor, and her eyes are locked on his.

"I don't know you. Who are you?"

Granny Lin looks down at herself. She is wearing a bright-yellow plastic poncho and a pair of grass-green rubber boots, her outfit for bath time. "I am your wife," she says.

"You are not my wife. My wife is Sujane. Where is Sujane?"

"Sujane is no longer with us. I'm your new wife."

"You're lying," Old Tang says, and stands up. "Sujane is in the hospital."

"No," Granny Lin says. "They lied to you."

Old Tang does not hear her. He pushes Granny Lin, and his arms are suddenly strong. Granny Lin clutches him, but he is wild with an uncontrollable force. She lets go of his hands, not knowing why she needs to fight with her husband over a dead woman. But he wrestles with the air and, two steps away, slips in a puddle of soapy water.

Nobody pays any attention to Granny Lin at the funeral. She sits in a corner and listens to the men and women who come up to talk about Old Tang's life: an accomplished physicist and a great teacher, a loving husband, father, and grandfather. The speakers finish and shake the

family members' hands, ignoring her at the end of the line.

I did not kill him, Granny Lin imagines herself telling every person there. He was dying before the fall. But she does not tell the truth to anyone, and instead admits her negligence. Nobody would believe her anyway, for she alone saw the light in his eyes, the last glimmer before the eternal night, as it is called, the brief moment of lucidity before the end.

Granny Lin does not get a penny from Old Tang's savings. She has looked after Old Tang for only two months, and has, in many of the relatives' minds, killed him with her carelessness. She does not blame the two sons. She can think only of their loss, a thousand times more painful than her own. When one of them suggests a job in a private boarding school that is run by his friend, Granny Lin almost weeps out of gratitude.

Situated in a mountain resort in a western suburb of Beijing, Mei-Mei Academy takes pride in being among the first private schools in the country. It occupies one of the few four-story buildings that were allowed to be constructed in the area. ("Connections, connections," the chef tells Granny Lin the day she arrives—how else could the school have gained the permit if not for its powerful trustees?) Private schools, like all private businesses, are sprouting up across the country like bamboo shoots after the first spring rain. Relatives of the Communist Party leaders are being transformed overnight into business owners,

appearing on national TV as representatives of the new proletarian entrepreneurs.

Granny Lin cannot imagine a better life now that she has become a maid at the academy. Every meal is a banquet. Meat and fish are abundant. Vegetables are greener than the ones Granny Lin remembers from her market days. Everything is produced by a small organic farm that serves the President and the Premier and their families—so the chef informs Granny Lin.

Sometimes Granny Lin feels sad at seeing so much good food go into the garbage. She begins to come late to her meals, waiting until the students finish theirs. Throughout the dining hall, untouched vegetables are left withering on the plates; shipwrecked fish lie flat on their half-gnawed bellies. Granny Lin spoons the leftovers onto her plate and dreams of having an express shuttle running between the school and the city every day, taking the unconsumed food to her old neighbors.

Eating such good food without working hard is a sin. In addition to the laundry and the dorm cleaning assigned to her, Granny Lin takes on other duties. She gets up early in the morning, and opens the classroom windows to let in the fresh mountain air. She sweeps and mops the terrazzo floor. She dusts and polishes the students' desks. She makes sure everything is meticulous, even though the janitor has cleaned the classrooms the night before. Sometimes, when there is still time before the wake-up bell, she leaves the school and takes a walk in the mountains. The morning fog is damp on her skin and her hair, and birds she has never seen in the city sing in a chorus. At such moments, Granny Lin feels overwhelmed by her good fortune. The years in the factory seem a distant dream now, and she no longer remembers what her life was like when she walked through the morning smog expelled by coal stoves and bargained at the market for vegetables puffed up by chemical fertilizers.

Often Granny Lin gathers an armful of wildflowers on her walk: mountain orchids, pearl cherries, jade barrettes. She arranges the flowers in vases for the six classrooms, one for each grade, but such a delicacy rarely lasts beyond the first period. Boys of all ages pelt one another with the flowers; the boy whose lips touch

the flowers is called a sissy. Girls in the upper grades pull the petals off and bury them in a mound in the schoolyard, their fingers ruthless and their faces shrouded with a sad seriousness.

The school is growing. Every month, a few new students arrive. Granny Lin is stunned by the parents' wealth, the ease with which they pay the initiation fee of twenty thousand yuan and another twenty thousand for the first year of tuition and room and board.

In the third month of Granny Lin's stay, the school celebrates the admission of its hundredth student with a feast. Kang, the boy who draws the lucky number, is six years old. Unlike the other students, who come from the city, he has been sent from a nearby province. A few days into his stay, the teachers and the staff members have all heard his story. Kang's grandfather used to be the leader of a big People's Commune in his home province, and his father has become one of the top agricultural entrepreneurs in northern China.

"I thought farmers liked to keep their sons at home," Granny Lin says to Mrs. Du, a dorm mother, as they search for foul-smelling socks under the mattresses. "They can almost stand up and walk by themselves" is how Mrs. Du describes the stiff socks that have been worn for too long.

"Not when he is the son of a disfavored wife," Mrs. Du says. "An extra is what he is."

"Are the parents divorced?"

"Who knows? But the father does have another wife, or a concubine. What's the difference? The boy's mother is no longer needed in the family, and the child has to go, too."

The thought of the boy, who is so small and occupies almost no space in the world yet is still in other people's way and has to be got rid of, saddens Granny Lin. She starts to look for the boy in the crowd. His clothes, of the same brand names as those that the other students wear, look wrong on him. Too large, too new, too trendy, the clothes do not belong to him any more than he belongs to the school. His face and hands always seem in need of a thorough washing, but after Granny Lin has tended to them several times she has to agree that it is not the child's or the dorm mother's fault.

In his second week, Kang starts to

come to the laundry room during the afternoon activity time.

"Granny, what's this?" Kang asks one day while Granny Lin is massaging some baby lotion into his cheeks.

"Something that will make you a city boy," Granny Lin says.

"Granny, where do you live?"

"I live here."

"But before you came here? Where is your husband's home?"

Granny Lin thinks for a moment. "In the city," she says.

"What's the city like? My mom said she'd take me to see the city."

"Where is your mom?" Granny Lin asks, holding her breath and trying to make her heart beat less loudly. The boy seems not to notice.

"She is at home."

"Your father's home?"

"No, my grandfather's home. My new mom lives in my father's home."

"What's your new mom like? Is she pretty?"

"Yes."

"Is she good to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you like her?"

"Yes."

"Do you like your mom, also? More than your new mom?" Granny Lin asks. She turns around to see whether anyone is walking past the laundry room in the hallway. She feels like a thief.

The boy, too, looks around nervously. He then comes closer and circles his arms around Granny Lin's neck, his mouth to her ear, his hot breath touching her earlobe. "Granny, I'll tell you a secret. Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"My mom said she would come and get me back one day."

"When?"

"She said soon."

"When did she say it?"

"Before my new mom moved in."

"When was that?"

"Last year."

"Have you seen your mom since then?"

"No, but she said she'd come soon, if I don't make my dad and my new mom angry," Kang says. "Granny, do you think the guards will let her in when she comes?"

"I'm sure they will," Granny Lin says.

The boy smells like a mixture of baby

THE WEATHER IN THE STREETS

For a time I lived in Hull, on Nantasket Beach, on Massachusetts' south shore, where the winter storms sent the ocean booming up the streets and threw its lobsters onto the driveways and into the hedges; where the storms would melt your leather shoes and get you icy sopping wet and so cold that you wouldn't turn your frozen face to speak to someone, and so cold that it didn't matter anyway—you couldn't hear.

My younger daughter, Rachel, was there as well. She was different from me, and looked at things differently. She had friends in every corner of that peninsula, and she liked the storm atmosphere and always knew whom to call—who had wood, whose truck might still start. And then her friends and their parents would appear, whole Irish families in hip boots, carrying clam rakes and gargantuan buckets of clams they had dug from the sand. These were permanent residents, and they knew how to behave in a weather emergency; they possessed batteries, candles, whiskey, tobacco and cigarette papers, cocoa, and coffee.

We were living on a beach street, in a three-story house, with Rachel on the second floor, alone, with her sheepdog, Lucky Boy, always walking right behind her, zigzagging, and refusing to stay out of her space, his nails clacking on the hardwood floors, seemingly intoxicated with devotion. I'd catch him checking on her when she was asleep, and catch her talking to him

even when he wasn't there. Me, I kept to the downstairs and, usually, to the same ready-to-bolt position in my chair. Way upstairs, or in and out, or mostly gone, was my some husband or other. I worked in Cambridge; commuted and worked and did what I could do. My neighbors asked for no apologies. They wandered onto their porches in pajamas and robes, or into their yards with boots pulled on and a coat thrown over. Their old, infuriating second cars were left parked beside our road, and never mind the cracked tail-light or the lack of a muffler.

Hull had once been, quite a while ago, one of the brighter spots, a resort place with splendid hotels, a bandstand, an amusement park with a famous roller coaster and a hand-carved carousel under a scalloped canopy. Folks came in on the ferry from Rowe's Wharf for the beaches, the food, the penny arcades, the orchestra and dancing at the pavilion. They went on the caterpillar ride, strolled along the seawall, sat on the great porch of the Hotel Nantasket and ate frozen vanilla custard and looked at the Atlantic sea.

The winters I was there, storms trashed the beaches, littered them horribly with mangled fish, great fish halves, and snarls of seaweed and plastic junk. Jellyfish that had seemed so graceful, glittering in the water, were now a plop of mucus on the shore. There were castaway lobster traps spangled with dozens and dozens of starfish. Rachel brought home a little one, believing it would dry out nicely,

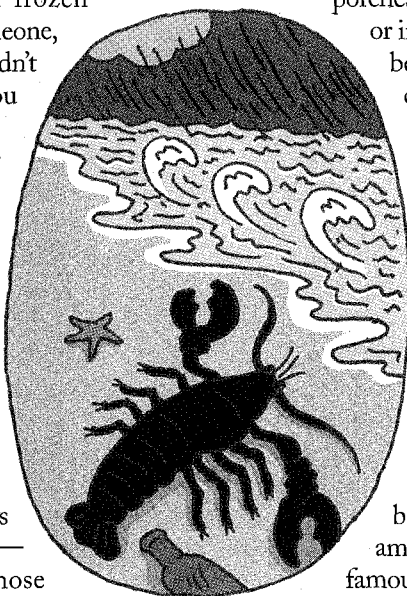
but after a day it began to reek. Once, after an accident at Logan, the sea threw up a blue airplane passenger seat. It floated onto the beach at G Street and, looking exhausted, lay on its side in the sand.

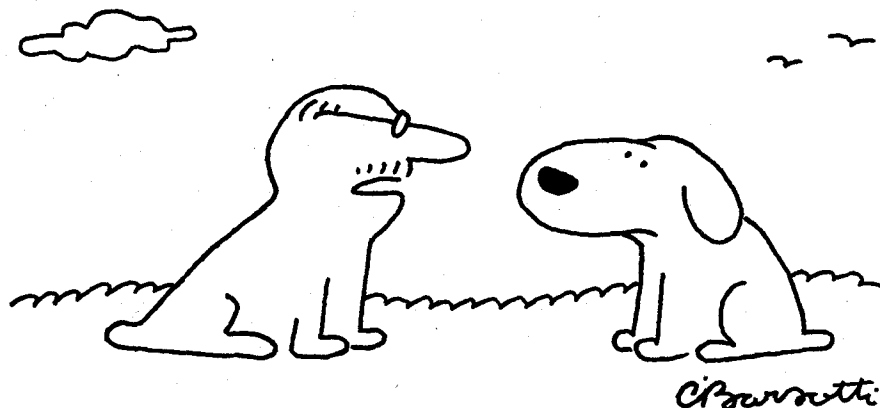
There were lobster boats some early mornings, all different-colored—a green-and-white striped one, a cadmium-yellow. They were roped to an orange scow that towed them a little way into the ocean, and then the boats continued out and spent the day. Each speck of boat, out on the still water, had a crew of two or three bundled-up men. But if a single dark cloud appeared they would head in, instantly, all the boats, all the men, churning home as if they were on fire.

A bad snowstorm went on into the night once, and Lucky Boy was off somewhere and had skipped dinner and stayed out, and as it got later and later Rachel planted herself at the side door and alternated between calling for, cursing, and insulting him, crying, and making promises, if he would only come back. A couple of the Irish neighbors got their Jeep fired up and running, and there they went, driving into the blizzard night to find the dog, though they never did.

Paragon Carousel was restored, the Bernie King Pavilion is being reconstructed, and the Giant Coaster—a wooden out-and-back, with a ninety-eight-foot lift—was dismantled and resurrected years ago and is someplace else now, at a park in Maryland, jerking those people around.

—Mary Robison





"It turned out that the powers that be had powers beyond my imagining."

lotion, fresh laundry, and summer sweat. It reminds Granny Lin of Old Tang after his bath, the way a dear person smells good. The thought makes Granny Lin's lips go dry, and she feels the boy's arms on her neck, hot and sticky.

On Friday afternoons, the parking lot outside the school gate is full of luxury cars. Chauffeurs and nannies come, and sometimes the parents themselves show up. Teachers and dorm mothers stand inside the gate, pointing out to one another who is the daughter-in-law of a powerful figure in the government and who has appeared in the latest hit movie.

Kang is the only child who stays for the weekend. His father has paid the extra fee for weekend care and has promised to come for him at the end of the semester. Sometimes Granny Lin wonders if the father will ever come and what will become of Kang if no one picks him up when the summer arrives. Will he be able to stay with her at the school? Then she wonders if she herself will be allowed to stay and, if not, where she will spend the two months before she is allowed to return in September.

After the last student is picked up every weekend, the teachers and the dorm mothers leave on a shuttle bus for the city. Apart from the two guards, Granny Lin is the only one who stays, and she has cheerfully agreed to take care of Kang.

They stand side by side at the school gate and wave at the bus. Both sigh with relief once it is gone. Kang darts across the yard to the activity room, flipping through picture books as fast as he can, eager to get to the next one. Granny Lin

comes in and sits down at his side, stroking his hair and watching him laugh to himself. When he finishes all the new books, they go out and play in the yard, Granny Lin pushing him in the swing until it is flying so high that Kang screams with excitement and fear.

When the weather is nice, they take long walks in the mountains. Weekend tourists swarm into the area, but Granny Lin and Kang are the only two people who do not worry about missing the bus or getting stuck in a traffic jam. They walk hand in hand, Kang's palm touching Granny Lin's, both sweating. Granny Lin tells old tales about flowers and grass. When she runs out of old stories, she makes up new ones.

After dinner, Granny Lin leads Kang to the bathroom. She waits outside with a towel and his pajamas, and he sings in the shower the song about the red dragonfly she has taught him. Always he shouts to Granny Lin after the first two minutes, asking if he can come out now. She replies that it would be good if he could stay in the shower for another five minutes. Then the boy goes on singing, his voice pure and perfect. Granny Lin feels a warm liquid move under her skin and in her heart.

Often, without turning off the water, Kang jumps out of the stall at Granny Lin. She pretends to be startled and screams, and he giggles and runs off before she can wrap the towel around his dripping body.

At night, as he sleeps, he mumbles in his dreams, his arms and legs thrown in all four directions under the blanket. Granny Lin tucks him in and watches him for a

long time, the unfamiliar warmth swelling inside her. She wonders if this is what people call falling in love, the desire to be with someone every minute of the rest of her life so strong that sometimes she is frightened of herself.

Granny Lin is not the first person to have noticed the missing socks. The dorm mothers, for two weeks in a row, tell her that the girls are complaining that their favorite socks are disappearing in the laundry. Granny Lin knows then what has happened to the socks. A few times, she has seen Kang clutching a girl's unwashed sock. He drops it into the basket when he realizes that she is watching him.

The next weekend, while Kang is playing a computer game in the activity room, Granny Lin searches his bed. She finds nothing under the mattress, where the children usually hide things. She folds back the blanket. She picks up the pillow, unzips the pillowcase, and sees five socks inside, rolled up into small bundles like newborn bunnies.

Granny Lin unrolls them: young girls' socks with flower patterns or cartoon animals. She thinks of putting them in her pocket, but stops at the thought of Kang groping in the pillowcase for the socks, something dear to him for reasons she does not know. She rolls the socks back up and stuffs them into the pillowcase.

On Monday, Granny Lin asks her supervisor for a half day off and takes the bus to the city, looking for socks that have the same patterns as the missing ones. She buys several packages of girls' socks in different designs.

Granny Lin becomes more careful with the laundry now. She makes sure all the girls' socks are back in their bags before Kang arrives. From time to time, she scatters around socks that she has bought, all of them having been washed and dried and then rubbed across the floor.

They are still the happy couple on weekends, but Granny Lin worries as she counts the missing socks that she has put out for Kang. She wonders if she needs to talk to him and find out the reason for what he is doing. But every time she opens her mouth she loses her resolve.

On weekends, as they sit in the shadow of the wisteria, Granny Lin wonders if this is the love she missed

in her younger years, hand in hand with a dear boy, not asking him to tell her the secret she is not allowed to know.

The weather gets hot, and the dorm mothers put mosquito nets over the students' beds. The first night, a boy in the bed next to Kang's gets up after the dorm mother leaves. With a small flashlight in his hand, he sticks his head inside Kang's mosquito net and shrieks in a low voice, letting the flashlight shine in Kang's eyes. Kang does not cry, as the boy hoped, but the boy is surprised and pleased to find Kang stroking his own cheeks with both his hands in floral socks.

Dorm mothers are called. Seven more socks are discovered, and by the end of the next day everyone in the school knows about the sick boy who steals girls' socks and does strange things with them.

Granny Lin watches the kids chase Kang around the schoolyard, calling him "sicko," "psycho," "porn boy," her heart wrenching as if it were a piece of rag in the washing machine. Kang is no longer allowed to visit the laundry room. She counts the days to the weekend and is afraid that she will break down before the three days pass.

On Friday afternoon, as they stand in front of the school gate, Granny Lin has to raise Kang's hand and wave for him. When the shuttle bus is gone, Granny Lin turns to Kang, who is kicking a pebble in front of him.

"Kang, come to Granny's room for a moment," Granny Lin says.

"No, I don't want to," Kang says, pulling free of Granny Lin's hand.

"What do you want to do? Let's take a walk."

"I don't want to take a walk."

"How about reading some books? A new box of books came in yesterday."

"I don't want to read."

"Let's get on the swing."

"I don't want to do anything," Kang says, pushing Granny Lin's hand off his shoulder.

Granny Lin's tears swell out of her eyes. She looks down at the top of Kang's head. To love someone is to want to please him, even when one is not able to. "Think of something you want to do, and we'll do it together. Think of something you want, and Granny will get it for you. You know Granny loves you."

"I want to go home. I want to see my

mom," Kang says. "Granny, do you think we can catch the train and go home for two days?"

Granny Lin looks down at Kang's upturned face, seeing the small hope grow bigger in his eyes. Kang grabs her hand. "Granny, just two days. Nobody will know."

Granny Lin sighs. "Forgive me, Kang. But Granny cannot do this for you."

"But why? You said you'd do anything."

"Anything that we can do here, in the school, in the mountains. Kang, good boy, we cannot leave the school."

It takes a minute for Kang to burst into tears. Granny Lin tries to quiet him and pull him into her arms. Kang pushes her away, and his eyes, filled with the cold anger that Granny Lin once saw in Old Tang's eyes, chill her. Kang runs across the schoolyard. Granny Lin runs after him, but she has to stop and catch her breath after a few steps. Her old body is failing her young heart.

Granny Lin thought that Kang would be crying in his bed, but the boy is not there. She calls out his name as she walks through the building, checking each unlocked door, the activity room, the music room, the dining hall. She looks under tables and behind curtains, and her heart sinks deeper each time her hope proves unfounded.

For an hour, Granny Lin searches, until it occurs to her that the boy may have left the building, and even the school. Paralyzed by the thought, and imagining all kinds of disasters, she calls the two guards, who are playing poker in the small room by the school gate. Neither wants to admit the possibility that the boy has squeezed through the gate, both insisting that he must be hiding somewhere in the building. More searches are carried out by the three of them. The searches yield nothing, and they each start to panic with different worries.

The police are called. The school supervisor is called. The dorm mothers are called. The guards make phone calls to whomever they can think of. Granny Lin watches one of the young men punch the number with a shaking hand, and wonders why he is so nervous. The guards are losing only a peaceful weekend. They will lose at most a month of salary, as both are relatives of the trustees. Boys disappear every day—what would they remember of Kang a year from now even if they never

found him? Granny Lin begins to cry.

But Kang shows up by himself, in the middle of the turmoil, unharmed, hungry, and sleepy. He must have played hide-and-seek with Granny Lin while she was looking for him. Or did he want to punish her for disappointing him? Granny Lin does not know. All she knows is what he told the school supervisor, that he fell asleep under the piano.

Granny Lin remembers looking under the piano, but nobody trusts an old woman's memory. Besides, what's the difference, even if she is telling the truth? She has proved incapable. More stories are remembered—of her eating the students' rations, of her carelessness with the laundry.

On the evening of the day the children return, Granny Lin is asked to leave. Her things are packed and placed at the gate: a duffelbag, not heavy even for an old woman.

"The happiness of love is a shooting meteor; the pain of love is the darkness following." A girl is singing to herself in a clear voice as she walks past Granny Lin down the street. She tries to catch up with the girl, but the girl moves too fast, and so does the song. Granny Lin puts the duffelbag on the ground and catches her breath, still hanging on to her stainless-steel lunch pail with her other hand. All the people on the street seem to know where their legs are taking them. She wonders when she stopped being one of them.

Someone runs past Granny Lin and pushes her hard on the back. She stumbles and catches a glimpse of a hand before falling down; a man in a black shirt runs into the crowd with her duffelbag.

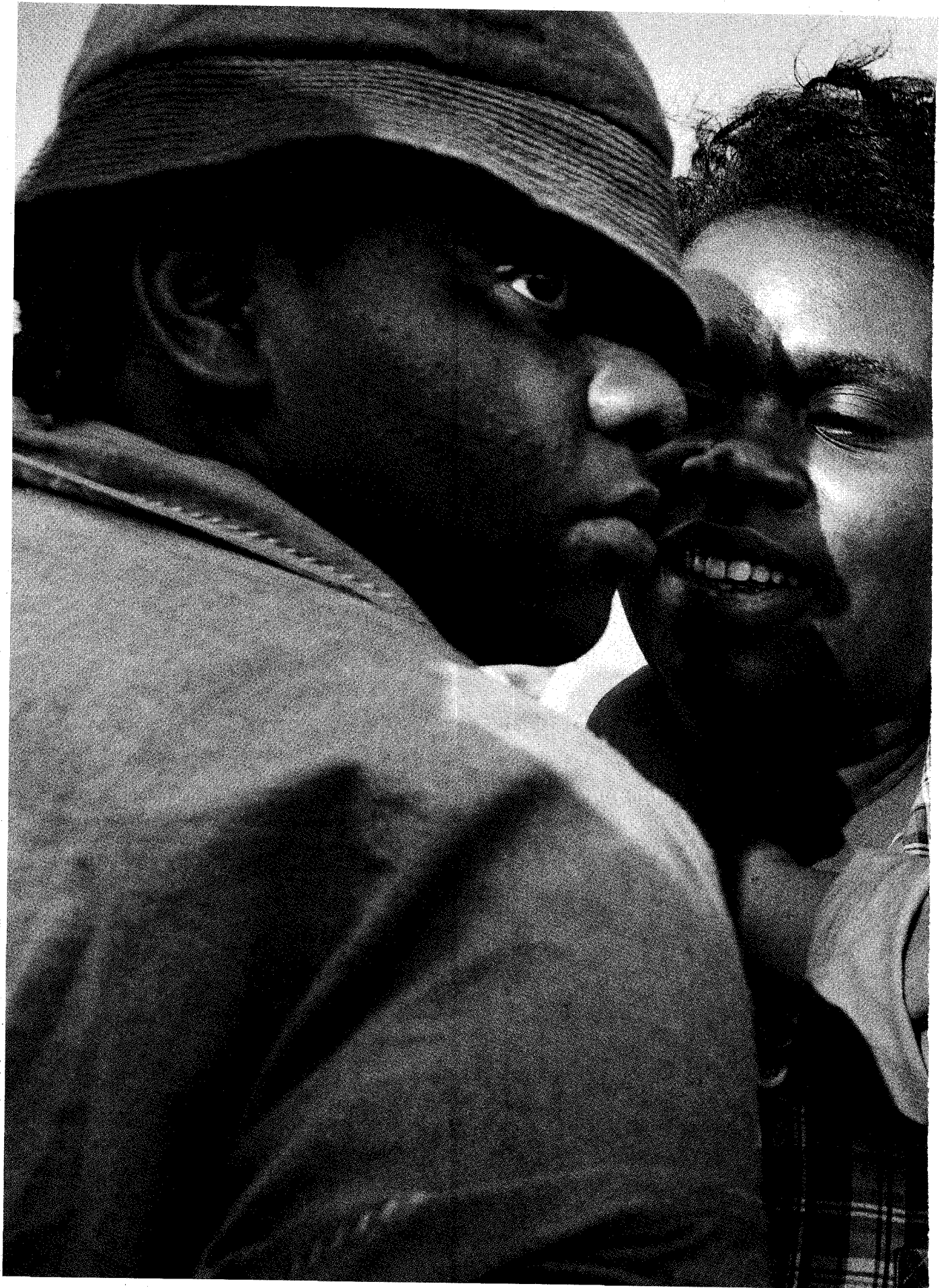
A woman stops and asks, "Are you all right, granny?"

Granny Lin nods, struggling to recover from the fall. The woman shakes her head and says aloud to the passersby, "What a world! Someone just robbed an old granny."

Few people respond; the woman shakes her head again and moves on.

Granny Lin sits on the street and hugs the lunch pail to herself. Hungry as people are, it is strange that nobody ever thinks of robbing an old woman of her lunch. That's why she has never lost anything important. The three thousand yuan of dismissal compensation is safe in the lunch pail, as are several unopened packages of girls' socks, colorful with floral patterns, souvenirs of her short love story. ♦

LEON LEVINSTEIN, "CONEY ISLAND" (1958)/HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY



ALL AUNT HAGAR'S CHILDREN

BY EDWARD P. JONES



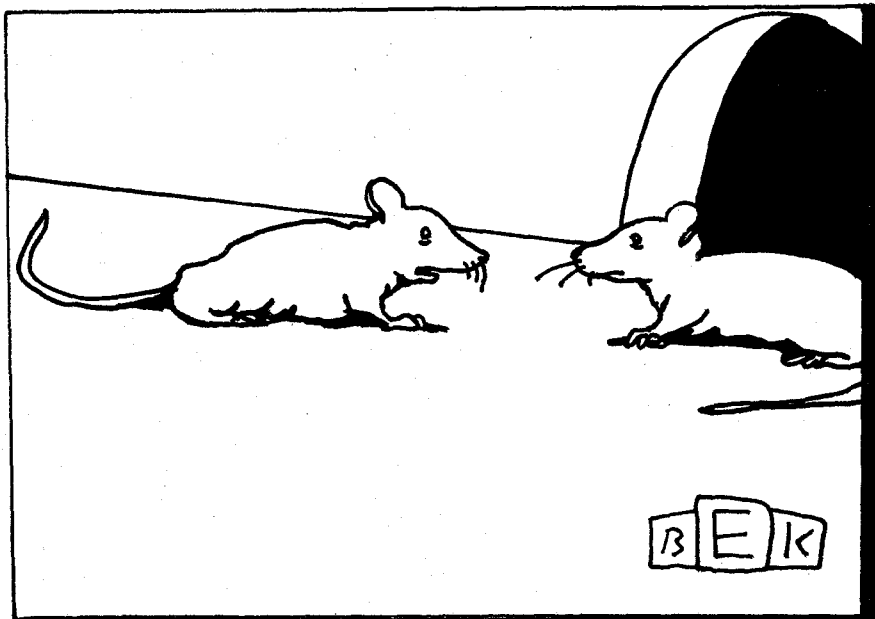
On what was to have been one of my last days in Washington, my mother, my aunt, and murdered Ike's mother came up to the second-floor office I had been sharing with Samuel Jaffe. This was three weeks after Sam had gone to Israel, and a little more than nine months since I'd left the Korean War. When the big front door downstairs opened and shut, it shook the windows of our building on F Street, and as the three women came in I watched the giant window in our office do a quick, awful shaking, then slowly come to rest. I heard the three coming up the stairs and learned seconds later that it was murdered Ike's mother who was wearing those heavy black old-lady shoes, which made the loudest sound as the women clumped their way up to me. This was two months since I'd told Sheila Larkin as kindly as I could that she and I were finished. *"So, you have your way with this woman and now you tellin her to just disappear?"* The three women were all the while talking, talking as easily as if they were sitting around over coffee and sweet rolls in one of their living rooms, the way they had no doubt been doing since before I was even a consideration in my mother's eye. Then they were standing in my doorway, the three of them. I turned from the giant window showing me a beautiful day on F Street and faced them. I put down the box I was holding and brushed myself off; a man like me does not greet the woman who brought him into the world while holding a box of dusty belongings from an undistinguished life. This was a little more than a month since the white woman had died right in front of my eyes. *"No, Sheila baby, that ain't what I'm sayin at all."*

"Talked to Freddy, and he told me say hi," my mother said. My older brother was studying to be a lawyer. She offered her cheeks and I kissed them, her face wrinkle-free. "I'm guiltless," she once said to me. Her dark

cheeks were lightly rouged. As a rule, my mother wasn't demonstrative. She lived in a sphere all her own, where few things could intrude and hurt her anymore. She always let Freddy and me in, but she kept her eye on the door while we visited, lest we say something wrong and she had to show us out. I got a letter from Freddy three weeks after I hit Korea: "You'd best return alive or Mama will never be the same. She can't stop crying." I spent many Korean months trying to reconcile the mother to beat all mothers of my childhood with the mother in Freddy's letters who was mourning me.

I touched my mother's elbow and stepped around her to Aunt Penny. I kissed her cheek. She and Uncle Al owned a grocery store at Fifth and O Streets, N.W. As children, Freddy and I had all the sweets boys could want. "Love ya," Aunt Penny said. The three women were all wearing gloves on that warm day; theirs may have been the last generation of Negro women to go about the world in such a way. "Here, Aggie," my aunt said, turning to Miss Agatha. I hugged Miss Agatha. I hadn't seen her for months, though we had talked soon after I returned from Korea, when I made the obligatory visits in my uniform to family and friends: a Negro had gone off to the man's war and survived to tell about it to all who had prayed for him. Miss Agatha's only child had been murdered while I was in Korea, and Freddy had sent me the articles from the *Daily News*. Ike Appleton had always gone for bad. He beat me bloody when I was in junior high school, and Freddy found him and whipped him just as bad, and after that I never had any trouble from Ike. The articles had a picture of Ike in his high-school-graduation cap.

Miss Agatha's face had enough lines for all three women—someone had come up behind Ike as he sat over supper and blown his brains out.



"I'd much prefer to hide inside walls with original moldings."

"You look well," Miss Agatha said. "Maybe workin' downtown mongst white folks grees with you." When I was eight, I went to some boy's birthday party and spent days telling Freddy about the good time I'd had and about all the boss gifts the boy had received. On the third day of all that talking, my mother, unsmiling, said to me, "Remember, every happy birthday boy is headed for his grave."

I asked Miss Agatha, "How you been?"

"Fine. In my way."

My mother came around me. I knew she had been behind me, taking the measure of me and the room, finding something she could use against me. She took off her gloves, slowly, one long finger after another. "She's here to ask for your help," my mother said. "Aggie thinks you know things. It ain't for me to tell her different." I looked at her. "She thinks her way." Any day now, I was due to go off to Alaska to hunt for gold with a war buddy. ("I didn't think white people let Negroes into white Alaska," my mother said when I mentioned my plans.) The "favor" thing sounded like a big obstacle between me and gold and cars and clothes and more women than I could shake a dick at, as my buddy had put it. I was ready for a new place; I was a veteran of Washington, D.C., and there was nothing else for me to dis-

cover. And I wanted to get far away, because I thought it might help me to stop thinking about that dead white woman. "A moll is gav vain ah rav und ah rabbit sin," the woman had said as she was dying. The night before, I dreamed I had been able to save her. She had gotten up off the streetcar tracks and walked away. "A favor. We don't ask for much," my mother was saying.

That could be true about women. Even Sheila Larkin had said it that last time, when I told her we were finished: "God knows I don't ask for much from you, man." Maybe in Alaska I could learn something new about women and become a different kind of veteran. My mother opened her pocketbook and dropped her gloves into it and, while looking at me, one of her two living children, snapped it shut. That sound was all the room had.

"They killed my Ike," Miss Agatha said, as if I needed to be reminded. He was one of only sixty-six people murdered in D.C. that first year I was away. "Near bout two years gone by and they ain't done any more than the day it happened."

"If they are doin' somethin', they keepin' it secret," Aunt Penny said. "One more colored boy outa their hair. It's a shame before God, the way they do all Aunt Hagar's children."

"Penny," my mother said, "don't get

worked up now." My mother was the youngest of them, Miss Agatha the oldest by at least five years. When the three were girls in Alabama, a white man had set out after Miss Agatha as they walked home from school. The man tried to drag her into the woods and have his way with her. My mother and my aunt picked up rocks and beat the man down to the ground until he was no more than an unconscious lump. In the woods, when it was done, the girls held each other and cried, half out of their minds, afraid of what the world was going to do to them. They were barefoot. The man lay in the woods for three days, covered with tree bark and leaves, half in life, half in death. He was not a rich man, but he was white. So when the law discovered him, dead or alive, it would do everything to find out what had happened to him.

I got a chair for Miss Agatha. Once seated, she pulled out her hat pins and took off her hat, a modest thing with a veil pulled back over it, black like her dress and black like her old-lady shoes with Cuban heels. A woman's boy child deserved more than one year of mourning.

"I have waited and I done called the police," Miss Agatha said. "I just wanna know who hurt my boy so I can put my mind to rest. I'll leave the punishin' up to God. But I must know. I even talked to a colored policeman at No. 2. You'd think a colored policeman would help me."

"Trust what they do, Aggie, not the color of their skin, is what I say," Aunt Penny said. "You put a Negro workin' round white folks and he starts forgettin'."

"Miss Agatha, I'm no detective," I said, looking first at her and then at my mother. I had been in the military police in Korea, doing nothing. Lording it over some Southern cracker for a bit. Helping drunks back to their tents and thinking myself blessed if I didn't get puked on. But murder was a dance on the more complicated side of life. And I, a veteran hearing Alaska singing, didn't want to ask any big questions and didn't want anybody asking me any big questions. I was twenty-four and just starting to dance away on the easy side—a little soft-shoe here, a little soft-shoe there.

"You know a lot more than them fools at No. 2," Aunt Penny said. Working in Sam Jaffe's office, I wanted to say, wasn't the same as finding a killer. Sam, a lawyer, did some private-detective

"He'll help us, Aggie. Don't worry about that," Aunt Penny said, putting both hands on Miss Agatha's shoulders. "They gonna pay, whoever did it." Since Sam had left for Israel on business, I'd been leaning back in my chair facing that giant window onto F Street and imagining returning to Washington with Alaska gold. I saw myself walking down M Street, strutting about New York Avenue, my pockets bulging with nuggets, big pockets, big as some boy's pockets fat with candy—your Mary Janes, your Squirrel Nuts, your fireballs.

The families of the three girls were sitting and standing around the parlor in Miss Agatha's house. She was in her father's arms on the settee. The youngest children were being fed in the kitchen. My grandfather, arms crossed and leaning in the doorway, said that the men in

"Not none of my son goin out and

"Do nothin, Morris," my grandfather's mother said. "You can't kill in Aggie's name. What would become of her? Ask yoself that, son. What would become of Aggie? What would become of your own chirren if you had your way with him? What would come of Penny and Bertha if you killed that man?"

A *moll is gav vain ah rev und ah rab-bit sin,*" I said as I listened to the three women go back down the stairs. I watched them walk the few steps to Eighth Street and turn the corner, heading to Kann's Department Store. It was the Sabbath, so Sam's wife, Dvera, was



"We're not here to talk about what I want for Christmas—we're here to talk about what you want for Christmas."

not upstairs in the back office. She and I rarely spoke, and I had never been up to the third floor. She made me nervous, moving about in her silence with those fat ankles.

I called my brother, whom Sam had encouraged to become a lawyer. He might know where I should start to look for a murderer. His wife, Joanne, told me he was out. Joanne was pregnant. A root worker had had Joanne throw ten hair pins up in the air and have them fall on one of Joanne's head scarves. Examining the pattern of the fallen pins, the root worker predicted that Joanne would be having twin girls. The news excited my mother like nothing else I'd seen. I didn't care. I was not a man to suffer the company of children. Joanne said, "I'll have Freddy get in touch." "No," I said. "I guess it can wait." Lying naked in her bed beside me, Sheila Larkin had said two months ago, "I'll wait for you until you return from Alaska, man. I'll wait."

At about four, I closed the office and drove to Mojo's in my Ford, the only meaningful thing I had bought with my Army money, taking the route I thought would best help me to avoid Sheila Larkin. I had been very successful in avoiding Sheila since I'd broken up with her. I knew how vicious she could be. I did not want to go to Alaska with a face scarred by lye.

At Mojo's, on North Capitol just up from New York Avenue, Mojo's wife, Harriet, told me he was away. I had a few sips of beer at the bar, and when Mary Saunders and Blondelle Steadman came in I followed them to a booth. They had been in my brother's class at Dunbar High School. I once thought I loved Mary.

"What you out and about for on a nice Saturday, soldier man?" Mary said. She had come from Jamaica when she was about twelve and Jamaica was still there when she talked. "Hear Alaska was calling you. You done had all our women and now you want theirs." They were sharing a cherry Coke.

"Still going, but I have to do a few things fore I leave. Yall member Ike?" Blondelle nodded, and Mary drank some Coke. "Miss Agatha want me to find out who did it."

They laughed. It went on for a good

minute. They had been together for many years, so that now one woman sounded like the other. Blondelle called to Harriet behind the bar. "Heard the latest? Soldier man's now a detective man. Like in the picture show." Harriet held a glass up to the light to see how clean she had gotten it. "Next he'll be a rocket-ship man, heh?" There were four women drinking milkshakes at the bar.

"The problem you have is everybody in the world hated Ike," Mary said. "Except his mother and his wife. They had to like him, had to love him." When I was a sophomore at Dunbar and Mary was a senior, my brother told me I had nothing to lose by asking her out. "But after them two," she said, "what you should do is close your eyes and put your finger on a list of names. Whichever one you pick, thas who did it." I followed Mary from school one day in April. She was walking with Blondelle, who wouldn't peel off so I could be alone with Mary and ask her out. In the end, I just went up to Mary and asked to speak to her private-like. When I was done, she went over to Blondelle and said, "Would you mind if he and I went out?" "I would indeed," said Blondelle, who didn't seem mad, didn't sound upset. My brother kept a lot about the world from me. "If I had told you," he said to me later, "it wouldn't be the same as finding out yourself."

"Miss Agatha's in pain," I said.

"We love Miss Aggie," Blondelle said. "So we wish we could help, but we have nothin." She wore glasses, and it struck me for the first time ever that she was pretty. How had I missed that? The April day that Mary told me no, she took my hand and held it long enough for me to know that there should be no hard feelings. Blondelle walked away. Mary kissed my mouth. There was a pleasant smell I came to associate with all colored women. If a man is to be rejected by a woman, he should be rejected by a woman like Mary, for then he might not be bitter about women. Blondelle was saying, "You know what a devil Ike could be. You could accuse anybody in Washington." She sighed. "You have a high mountain to climb. And even if you do find the person, you gotta go back down that mountain and tell it to Miss Aggie." She drank. "You been to where they killed him?"

"What?"

"Where he was killed? He lived downstairs from Miss Aggie. The second-floor place."

"I ain't been there."

"They didn't teach you that in detective school?" Mary said. Blondelle killed the Coke. "They never taught you to visit the scene of the crime? You should use some a that mother wit you was born with."

Blondelle said to Mary, "Oh, you know the private-dick people don't like using mother wit. That would be too much like right."

I blinked and then blinked again. The white woman, lying across the streetcar tracks in the middle of New Jersey Avenue, was the first woman I had ever seen die. I never saw one woman die in Korea. Not one. *Zetcha kender lock gadank za tira vos ear lair rent doe.*

It was near on seven o'clock when I got to Mr. and Mrs. Fleming's house on Sixth Street, where I was renting a room. It was late September, and though there was some sun left I didn't want to visit a dead man's place with night coming on. In Korea I had got used to dead men everywhere, but that was different from one dead man on a street where I had grown up. I had played with that dead man when he wasn't either of those things. I had been a happy boy on M Street.

I took a nap, and as soon as I stepped through the dream door the dead white woman was waiting for me. She was alive again. She had a child on either side of her, and I kept thinking that those children would help me to save her, help me to keep her always alive.

I called Freddy on the Flemings' telephone when I woke, but he hadn't returned.

On Sunday, I cleaned my room and went to Ike's apartment, at 423 M Street. First I visited Miss Agatha on the third floor. She was glad to see me and I was glad for that. When I told her what I wanted to do, she gave me the key to her son's place below her. She herself hadn't seen the apartment since the night she and Alona, his wife, five months pregnant then, had found Ike. The landlord had had trouble renting the place even after it was cleaned up, Miss Agatha said, and no one had lived

TURN SIGNALS

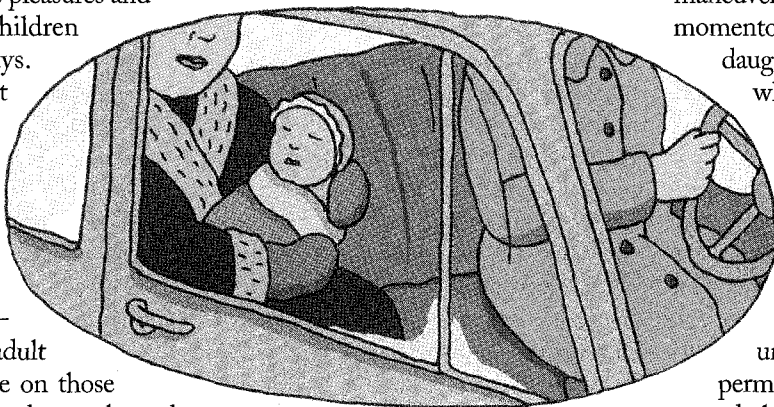
Three of my four daughters were born in the dead of winter. One made it to early spring only because she was overdue. So for me the shortest days of the year and the deepest cold are a backdrop to the perilous stories of birth and the radiant exhaustion of new motherhood. Now that my three oldest daughters are in their teens, I can add driving to the pleasures and dangers of having children with winter birthdays.

Because the oldest two both took the driver's test the day after their sixteenth birthdays, much of the practice driving—with learner's permits, and me riding as the requisite adult passenger—took place on those slush-ridden, black-iced, snowbound, or low-visibility Minnesota mornings as we made our way harrowingly to school. The rite of passage was conducted on the bitterly cold asphalt of the Golden Valley driver's course. Both daughters passed the test by one point on their first try—a result recounted with pride and excitement to a mother who could react only with a terrified gulp.

Then came the big moment: my daughter would stride to the driver's side of the car, pull the door open, slide in, and drive away. Both times, I was unprepared. After all, when they took their first steps they walked *into*, not out of, my arms. Once the car had rounded the corner of the street and my daughter had disappeared, I'd stand rooted to the boulevard. Inevitably, an unpredicted ice storm would begin a few minutes later. But there was so much to be scared of in addition to the weather—all the reasons that the cost of car insurance for teen-agers is astronomical. Not to mention the other drivers. I'd experience a form of

parental sorrow that should be endowed with a German portmanteau word, say, *Mutterkinderwinterfahrenschade*.

When I was on the upslope to fifty, I found that I was pregnant again. My due date was, of course, in January. When winter came that year, everything coincided—the novice driving, the hormones (mine and my



teen-agers'), the wretched ice on the streets, and the gorgeous new snow. The time was fraught with my efforts to let my teens be teens, even as I seemed to be regressing into a shadowland of jitters.

My youngest daughter was born during one of those January thaws when the snow packs low to the earth, exuding a heavy mist that turns a golden peach color under halogen street lamps, and everything is muted in a fog of sunset. On road surfaces, this fog freezes to an unspeakably slick rime that you need crampons to walk on. My baby's father drove his red Dodge pickup ninety miles an hour to get to the hospital. He literally slid all the way down I-94. Everyone was somehow fine.

As we prepared to leave the hospital on a melting, sparkling morning, we realized that my oldest daughter would have to drive me and the baby home. There was no safe place in the truck for a baby seat, and I was not allowed

behind the wheel of a car. We put the new baby in the sky-blue minivan we had relied on for years. I rode. The baby slept. I was amazed at it all: our safe, orderly progress, the unhazardous conditions, our processional grandeur as we were guarded from behind by the red Dodge Ram. I had made a surprise loop, it seemed, a double-back maneuver in my life. The ride was momentous, historical, and calm. My daughter's hands on the steering wheel were properly placed at ten o'clock and two o'clock, as she had been taught. The trees were dripping. The street washed dark. We reached home, and the rest of our lives commenced.

It snowed and snowed until the snow seemed permanent. The nights were crazed, the nights were peaceful. There was the radiance and the madness, and now, three years later, another daughter—about to turn sixteen—has begun painting and unpainting her fingernails and performing other mysterious gestational rituals that will culminate, I know from experience, with her rising into the winter light, the day after her birthday, and passing her driver's test by one point. When she drives away, I'll have only the baby left. And when the baby—unthinkable thought—drives away, too, I'll stand on the boulevard for a long time before walking back into the house. Inside, in my old age, I'll take up drinking or knitting or prayer, or perhaps all three at once; I'll produce sacred three-armed sweaters that will at least keep my girls warm on winter roads.

—Louise Erdrich

there since; colored people believed dead people should stay dead, but they also knew that dead people tended to follow their own minds. Clinging to Miss Agatha's dress was her granddaughter, not quite two years old. "Hi," the kid kept saying to me. "Hi hi." I nodded to her and went downstairs.

I turned the key every which way, but the door refused to give, and I finally had to push my way in with such force that the place shook. I flicked on the light, though the sun coming through the bare windows should have been all a man needed. I looked at my watch and sighed. There was furniture, but I figured it was show furniture the landlord had put there to entice a possible tenant.

A cheap snapshot of Ike and Alona was taped to the icebox. In the picture, sepia, torn at one corner, Alona was smiling, but Ike, wherever they were, looked sombre. Alona had a determined look. Perhaps she had been trying to get Ike to smile.

For some reason, there was only one chair at the table. At first, I thought this chair facing the window was the one Ike had been sitting in when the guy shot him in the back of the head. But with all the blood and stuff there must have been, this couldn't be the death chair.

In the bedroom there was a stripped-down double bed. At the head of the bed, on the left side, where a pillow would have been, I saw the faint brown ghost of blood. I knew that Ike wouldn't

have moved from that kitchen table once he was hit, so it was blood from another event. In the bathroom there was a rather large bottle of Mercurochrome and three bottles of iodine in the medicine cabinet and, under the sink, a pasteboard box with bandages. There was also half a box of Kotex. I sighed again. I shook the pasteboard box and clumps of hair appeared from under the bandages. What could the landlord have been thinking, leaving all that shit there?

I returned to the kitchen. Whoever had cleaned it had done a good job. The apartment could have been rented if someone saw that room and didn't know its history. I stood in the middle of the kitchen and turned around and around, looking at everything as critically as I could for long seconds. I had no goddam idea what the hell I was doing.

Miss Agatha gave me sweet-potato pie when I went back up. Alona was also at the table, holding the child. "Hi hi," the kid kept saying to me. The pie was good, but it wasn't reward enough for having to put up with that child.

"They say you're going to Alaska," Alona said once I was midway through the pie. I nodded. She had been one of the smartest students Dunbar had ever known, destined for things that I, with my average brain, could never imagine. "Hi hi," the child said. In her junior year Alona had fallen in, as my mother would have said, with Ike, and after that she was walking around on the plain old

earth just like me and everybody else the Dunbar teachers never cooed over. Alona said, "I once read a *Life* magazine article about a man in Alaska who was seeking solitude. He made a place for himself that was eighty miles in any direction from other people. He lived there for twenty years."

"That ain't for me," I said. "I need bodies around." "Hi hi," the girl said. I waved to her. I was nearing the end of the pie. I wanted another piece and wondered if it would be worth it to put up with her.

Alona grinned. "You might try something like that when you get there. If the gold doesn't pan out, try it and write to me." There was something positive in the way she was talking, as if she had been to Alaska, looked around, and knew things would go good for me there.

"Alona's decided to go on to Howard, go to college," Miss Agatha said.

"Mama's always bragging on whatever I do."

"You deserve braggin on, child," Miss Agatha said. "You know how much I believe in you, honey." She said to me, "Alona's my future."

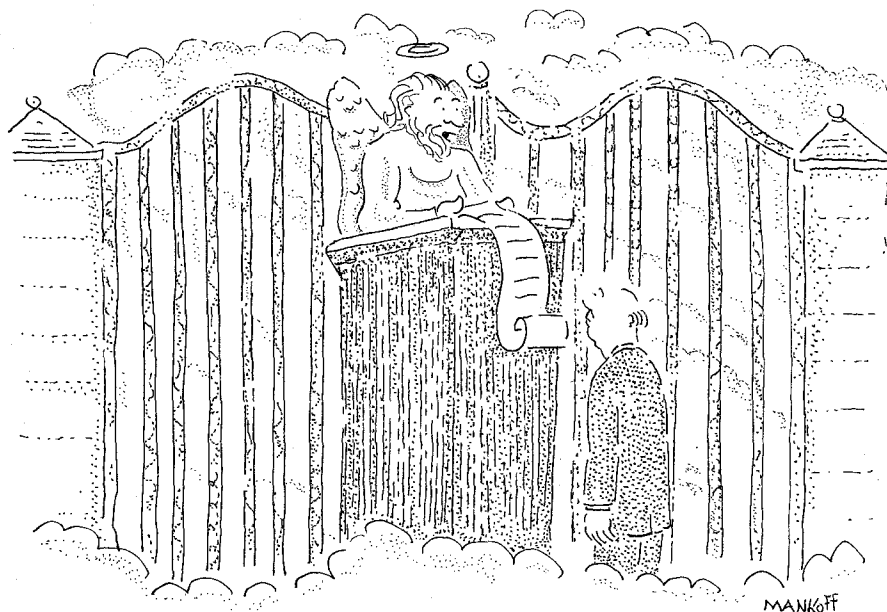
"Whatcha gonna be takin up?" I said, the way my mother would.

"I haven't decided," she said, and she looked a bit dreamy-like, like a man thinking about all the gold in his pockets. "I'll decide down the road. Won't I, sweetums? Won't I, sweetums?" She stood the child up on her lap and kissed her face until she collapsed in laughter. After a bit, the child got down from Alona's lap and scurried off to the living room. Alona stood up. "Have some more pie," she said. "It was as good as usual, Mama," and she put her arms around Miss Agatha and kissed her cheek and left.

"I don't know what I would do without her," Miss Agatha said. "Son, you find somethin down there?" She pointed her index finger down.

"I can't say, ma'am, cause I'm just startin out. But I plan to keep on it. Don't worry bout that."

"He was into some things I would never appreciate, I have to tell you." I nodded. "But towards the end I think he was tryin to get hisself together. Tryin to make things right with Alona, with the baby comin and all, you know. I'm sure it



"Actually, he's not all that big, but he's really ripped."

woulda been a new day for him." She swept a few crumbs from the table into her hand and then brushed them with the other hand into her empty coffee cup. Watching the crumbs fall, I wanted to do the very best I could for her. "You might hear some bad things bout Ike. I can't testify to that. People tend not to lie bout a dead man, so I can't testify to anything they say. All I can say is that even if he was the Devil hisself he was still mine. I gave him life."

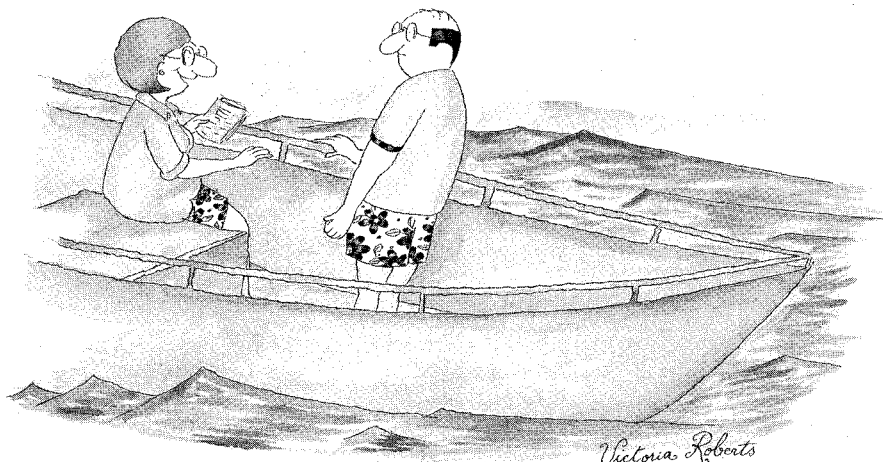
"Yes, ma'am." I got up and took my plate and fork to the sink, the way I had been taught. I ran hot water onto the plate. "Td best get on, Miss Agatha, but I'll be back workin on things tomorrow."

"Maybe you shouldna been workin today, on the Lord's day. God might not appreciate it."

I went home to clean up before going to my mother's for Sunday supper. Every Sunday since I had finished high school and gone out on my own, my mother had made a big fried-chicken supper for herself, my brother, and me, usually with string beans, potatoes boiled with a bit of fatback, and corn bread with crackling. An apple or peach cobbler. Every other Sunday I got to choose the Kool-Aid, and I almost always picked grape. Freddy was a lime man. After Freddy married, his wife came, too, of course, so I got to enjoy my grape Kool-Aid only every third week. Joanne was into orange Kool-Aid, which I hated. A punk flavor. God only knew what shit their twin girls would choose, but I had no plans to be around when those two started showing up and spoiling everything and putting my choice of Kool-Aid off to the fifth or sixth week. Gold could buy grape Kool-Aid every day of a man's life. My mother had never commanded that we be there each Sunday at six. It was simply in her sons' blood to know to show up. I suspect that if the Korean War had been fought as close as Maryland or Pennsylvania my blood would have sent me to her every Sunday.

Afraid I would see Sheila Larkin, I took the long way—down Fourth Street, then along New York Avenue to Sixth Street. Afraid of lye in my face. I felt bad about her, but she wasn't in my future.

I sat on my bed in the upstairs back room and drank the last of some whiskey a friend had given me, listening to WOOL all the while. On Sundays



"You may enjoy swimming with the dolphins, Howard, but do they enjoy swimming with you?"

WOOL was full of religious shit, and it always depressed the hell out of me. But I didn't change the station. *A moll is gav vain ah rav und ah rabbit sin.* I put some water in the empty bottle to get the last of the juice out of it. Then I took out the booklet on Alaska and turned to page 6, the one with "little known facts about our northern neighbor." Alaska was not even a state. *Zetcha kender lock, gadank za tira vos ear lair rent doe.*

About a week before Sam Jaffe went to Israel, I was on the streetcar headed down New Jersey Avenue to see a friend in Northeast when I decided to get off and visit Aunt Penny and her husband, on Third Street. My car was acting hincty, so I had put it in the Ridge Street garage. Three women preceded me off the streetcar at L Street. One of them was a white woman. The first two women went on across the street to the sidewalk, but just as I was about to step down from the streetcar the white woman turned and held her arm out to me. I thought she wanted to get back on the car. I stepped down and to the side to make way. She was less than three feet from me. She took two steps toward me and began to collapse, her arm still out to me.

I heard her say, "*A moll is gav vain ah rev und ah rabbit sin.*"

I got to her before her head hit the ground.

She said, "*Zetcha kender lock, gadank za tira vos ear lair rent doe.*"

Her head was covered with a gray

woollen scarf, which was much too heavy for a warm day. I could see that beneath the scarf there was a wig. I thought, If we can keep her wig in place, just the way it was when she walked out her front door, everything will be fine. Her dark-blue dress came down to her ankles. She was far too young for the old-lady black shoes she had on. I lowered her head to the ground, and just as I did she closed her eyes. I looked around for someone to help, but no one came. I kept thinking, Where in the world is that streetcar conductor? Where the hell is that man? Isn't this his job? And then, seeing the stopped streetcar gleaming in the sun, I thought, Green and off-white are perfect colors for a streetcar. The woman struggled with each breath. I could see several colored women looking out the streetcar windows at me and the white woman.

I tilted her head back and tried to give her breath, the way the Army had taught me. My mother had always told my brother and me that if she ever caught us kissing a white woman she would cut off our lips. "You ever try coolin soup with no lips? Try it and see. It won't work. That soup will never cool and you'll starve to death."

For a long time, I tried to help the woman, but I began to see that only the breath of God could help her. Would that white streetcar conductor show up and think that I was trying something untoward? Would he try to kill me for doing the right thing? Try coolin that

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tomato soup yall love with no lips. Try it and see what it gets you boys. Three of the colored women on the streetcar came to us and knelt down. One caressed the white woman's cheek. "It's all right, son," the colored woman said. I saw then that the white woman was dead. "You done your best. At least you walked with her all the rest a the way." In the end, I laid the white woman's head down on the ground, but a human head on metal tracks and concrete in the middle of a city street seemed so out of place that I put my hand under her head again. By and by, the dead woman let go of my other hand and one of the colored women soon put her own hand under her head where mine had been.

Another of the women took a new sweater with the tag still on it out of a Hecht's bag and put it under the white woman's head. I stood up. Traffic up and down New Jersey Avenue had stopped, and on any other day that would have been something to see. I went to the sidewalk and then I turned and went down L Street toward Northeast, which wasn't the way to my aunt's. Eventually, after a long time, I found my way to my mother's house. She fixed me something to eat, and though I didn't tell her about the white woman she saw how the hot food just went cold lying on the plate and said I should sleep at her place that night. I said I would go on home, but my mother said I would do no such thing.

I woke up Monday morning with the dead white woman speaking in my head. *A moll and a rabbit*... As I looked at my face in the mirror while I shaved, it came to me that I might not ever be able to get the voice out of my head. When my great-grandfather was a slave, a patroller who owned no slaves and little more than what he was wearing killed a slave who was coming back from seeing his wife on another plantation. The dead man had been my ancestor's best friend. My great-grandfather called himself by the dead man's name forever after that, and no one, not even his wife and seven children, could move him from it. I have that dead man's name. Way down in Choctaw, Alabama, there are two names on my great-grandfather's tombstone. Two dates of birth and two dates of death.

I didn't do much about finding Ike's

murderer until the next Sunday. I spent some of that week getting stuff together at Sam's office. The rest of the time I just hung out at Mojo's. I didn't take Miss Agatha's advice about resting on the Lord's day and went out that Sunday morning after breakfast to do what I could. My Ford was acting up again, so I left it in front of the house. I went up Sixth Street. There was a big crowd around Daddy Grace's church, but I didn't see anyone I knew. I turned onto M. Sheila Larkin slept very late on Sunday, so I wasn't afraid of meeting her.

I knocked at the front first-floor apartment in Miss Agatha's building. A woman opened the door, and as soon as she did a mynah bird in a giant cage behind her gave a wolf whistle, quite distinct and quite loud. It was about twelve o'clock; Sheila was stretching in her bed, wondering if today was the day she would get me. After I told the woman who I was and what I wanted, she opened the door wider to let me in. She was wearing a housecoat. She could have been thirty or forty. I was getting better at determining a woman's age, but I wasn't yet good enough to tell about her. She was good-looking, and she would be that way for a long while.

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Just like that!" the bird said.

The woman pointed to an easy chair for me to sit in, and sat across from me on a couch with cushions that had deep impressions. Somebody had sat on those things and the cushions had never got over it. She said her name was Minnie Parsons.

"I ain't sure what I can tell you," Miss Minnie said, crossing her legs. "I talked to some colored cop a day or so after it happened. He asked me questions, but he seemed more interested in Billie, there. 'How you make it talk?' he kept sayin. 'How you get him to say all that?' He didn't seem to care much about poor Ike."

"I'm only flesh and blood!" Billie said.

She said she knew Ike "only in passin," and as she crossed and recrossed her legs something told me that it wasn't true. "I knew Alona better. And Miss Agatha's like my own mother." Her apartment was well kept, pictures of children on the walls, pictures of adults in Sunday clothes on the mantelpiece. On the wall behind the couch there was

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just a cross, with Jesus' head hanging down, because he had given up the ghost. The obligatory cloth covered his privates. The nails through his hands and feet were painted red. No blood. "You at No. 2?" Miss Minnie said.

"No, ma'am." I told her I wasn't a detective and had just been in the military police in Korea.

"Don't treat me like I'm that old," she said. "Don't go yes-ma'aming me. I ain't old. You want somethin to drink?" I said no. "My husband was in the Army," she said after a bit. "He was a cook. Still a good cook. Can't you tell?" She leaned to the side and slapped her thigh.

"Like that?" the bird asked.

I asked her if she had been home the night Ike was killed. She said that she had but that she heard nothing. She knew Miss Agatha had been out, maybe at church. She didn't know where Alona was. "Ain't no book that girl ain't read. . . . I heard Miss Agatha come in and go upstairs. It wasn't long before I heard both of them screamin. The whole buildin shook with them screamin."

"That a girl bird or a boy bird?" I asked.

She considered Billie for a while as it hopped down to the floor of the cage, stuck its head through the bars of the cage door, and looked to the left. "I'm only flesh and blood! I'm only flesh and blood!"

"I don't really know," Miss Minnie said. "Could be either. A woman once told me she could come and turn Billie upside down and inspect Billie's natural parts and then say one way or another, but I never sent for her. I suspect Billie's a girl."

"Oh."

"A woman knows when another woman's in her nest."

"There's more to come, somebitch!" Billie said.

Miss Minnie didn't react at all to the bad word, and I remembered my mother once saying that a woman comfortable around curse words would be comfortable around the Devil. I was ready to go. Miss Minnie said, as I stood up, "I will say that in my dealins with Ike he treated me with the utmost respect. Now, my husband . . . Hal didn't care for Ike too much. Billie liked him, though, cause she doesn't discriminate." She crossed her legs the other way again. "Would

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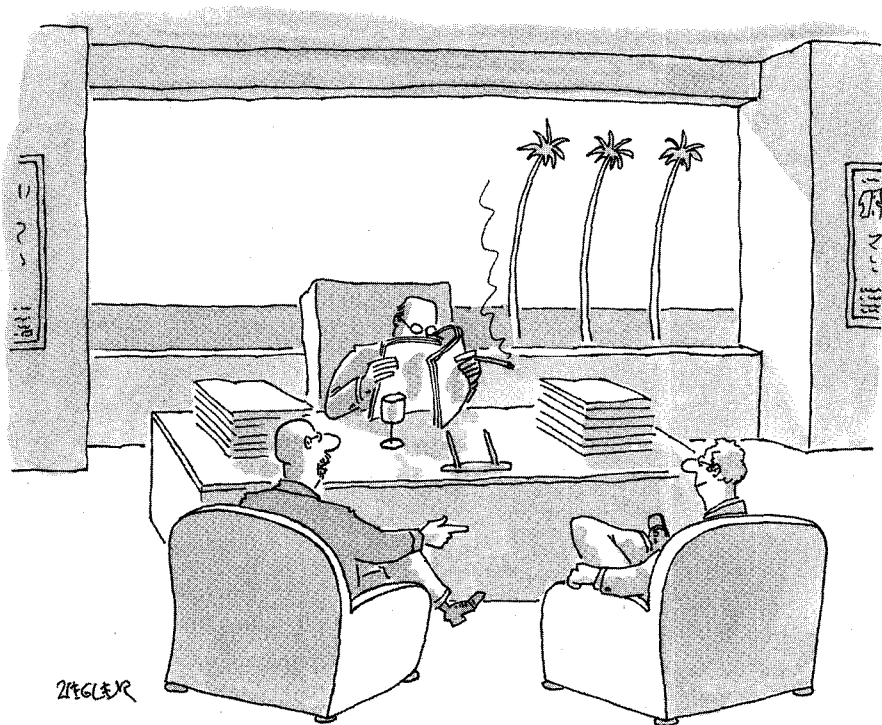
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you like somethin to eat? Wouldn't be no trouble to heat up a little somethin."

"No, ma'am."

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Just like that!"

"What I done told you bout that ma'am stuff?"

"Your husband comin back soon?"

"Oh?" she said. "Whatcha mean by 'soon'?" She laughed. "He just went to the store for somethin for breakfast. But he always stays long enough to be out to butcher the pig and collect the eggs. He'll be gone a long time. He slow that way."

I left, went down to the corner of M and Fourth, and stood there so I could see into Leon's store. The only man in it came out with a medium-sized paper bag and was walking on crutches. One of his legs had been cut off below the knee, while the other had been cut off above the knee. I watched him cross the street to my side and move past me so silently that if I hadn't seen him with my own eyes I wouldn't have known he was there. No huffing and puffing, no rattling from the paper bag, no sound from the crutches hitting the sidewalk. Just a nothing spiriting on down the street. He looked mean and tough, but maybe that was just me trying to compensate for a

fellow-veteran who had lost so much. He said something to a little girl coming the other way and went into Miss Minnie's building. I got to the building and asked the little girl, who was holding an even smaller girl by the hand, if she knew the man.

"Everybody know Mr. Hal," the girl said.

I went through the files in my memory trying to recall if that was what Miss Minnie had called her husband. I couldn't remember at all. Billie, I knew, was the bird's name, because she had mentioned the thing many times. "Mr. Hal married to Miss Minnie, right?" I said to the girl.

The girls looked at each other and laughed. "Evbody know that," the smaller girl said. "How come you don't know that?"

"Forget him," the older girl said, and before the girls went off she twirled her index finger around and around an inch from her ear. "Yeah," she said. "Just forget him if he don't know that. I bet he don't even know Mr. Hal ain't got no legs." "Forget him anyway," the smaller girl said.

I stood outside the building, trying to decide if I should give Hal a pass on

murdering Ike based on the crutches. I didn't have anybody else to suspect right then, so I kept him in my mental suspect files. Miss Agatha had let me keep the key to her son's place, but I decided against going back up there, lest she hear me and I have to tell her I'd found out nothing yet.

I felt as helpless as the day I first inspected Ike's apartment. Sheila Larkin had her cup of coffee in her hand by now, was probably looking out her N Street window, thinking about me. I left off detective work and took the long way home.

Mojo's was closed on Sunday. It was just as well. My mother always knew if I'd had even a drop of something before showing at her place for supper. Sometimes I gave a shit and sometimes I didn't and would drink before going to her. "You been drinkin," she had stated that last Sunday even before opening the door. That was all she talked about the rest of the evening. Then she dredged up ancient history: A month after I came back from Korea, I was still celebrating. One Tuesday I drank heavily at a friend's place, in the Augusta apartments at New York and New Jersey Avenues, only two blocks up from where the white woman would die. I made a mistake and told my buddy I could walk home all right. I got out to the corner at about three in the morning and dropped down on the sidewalk. Actually, I dropped more in the street than on the sidewalk. In those days, most of D.C. was asleep at that time of the night, so there wasn't any traffic to run over me. The street was warm, and all that warmth told me to take a nap. *Man, just nap.*

Where the old lady came from at that time of the morning I'll never know. But after she roused me I could see through all the alcohol that she was dressed like she was going to church. At three in the morning on a weekday.

"Ain't you Bertha's baby boy? Ain't you Penny's nephew?" she asked after I managed to raise my head. *Nap on, boy, just nap on.* "You Bertha's boy?" Even in the feeble street lights, I could see, up and through that glorious haze, that I had never seen that woman before in my life. "Ain't you Bertha's boy? Got a brother name Freddy that married Dol-

ley and Pritchard's girl? You Bertha's boy what went to Korea? Ain't yall's pastor Reverend Dr. Miller over at Shiloh Baptist?"

Hearing the lady talking, my buddy came down and they got me back up to his place. The old lady disappeared, and I never saw her again. My mother bided her time. One Sunday, three months later, after I said something "mannish" at supper, she brought up the drunk scene for the first time, told me what I was wearing down to the color of my socks, told me about the "ratty furniture" in every room of my friend's apartment, told me how many empty bottles were on the kitchen table, about the half-naked woman on the couch. The drunken dog staggering from room to room. "Your life won't be nothin but a long Tuesday night of devilment—Tuesday night and all day Wednesday . . . Kissin Miss Hattie's hand with them drunken lips." She went on for some thirty minutes, her voice never rising above a conversational tone. When she was finished, she pointed at my brother and then at the potatoes, which meant he was to pass them over to me. It was an orange-Kool-Aid Sunday. Joanne never said a mumbling word.

When I showed at my mother's place on L Street at about four, Joanne and her big belly full of twins were there, my brother having dropped her off and gone to pick up something at the law library. We sat in the living room. I must say this: my mother never treated her living rooms like she was saving them for Jesus Christ to visit. No plastic slip coverings and shit. "The key word in livin room is livin," she used to say, so wherever we were the living room was as comfortable for Freddy and me as our own room.

"Mama, is there anything you can tell me bout this Ike thing? Somethin Miss Agatha didn't tell me?" We were drinkin grape Kool-Aid.

"I don't think I can, son. He was troubled. I was there when he was born, and Ike came into the world full of trouble, God rest his soul." Joanne was beside her on the couch, looking real satisfied with herself. "Son, you know all I know. You know he was into that . . . that mess." She pointed at the crook in her arm and made a needle with her

finger. "I lived fifty years before I knew a colored person doin that. And it was somebody like a son to me." I perked up. My mother said, "What is the world coming to, Joanne? But he always 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am' me, I will give him that. And he wasn't no parrot, either, so he meant it when he said it. He was brought up right. His mama and daddy saw to that. But boys have a way of turnin into men, and then they sell their mother wit for thirty pieces of silver."

"Mama, you never told me Ike was doin that. Miss Agatha never told me, either."

"Son, how easy you think it is to tell anybody that your child has fallen far from the height you worked to put him on? How many people would I want to blab to bout your drinkin and foolishness? Not that people don't know already."

"But I'm tryin to find out who did that to her son and she didn't give me all the facts."

"Well, you got all the facts."

I went for more Kool-Aid and drank it at the kitchen window. She had raised my brother and me in Northwest, mainly around M Street, where Miss Agatha lived. Her new apartment was half a block past North Capitol Street, her first venture into Northeast. Slowly, place by place, my mother was trying to put herself midway between where I lived, on Sixth Street, and where my brother and Joanne lived, in Anacostia. My brother saw Anacostia one day when he was nine—the hills, the Anacostia River, the indescribable pleasantness, the way the wind came up over the river as if straight from the cooling mouth of God—and he vowed then that he would live there when he became a man. I, too, saw the place that day, but all I remembered was the chickens running around. And the little white pig lounging under the shade tree.

I filled my glass again. Women. The evening of the day the white man attacked Miss Agatha, it was my mother who suggested that she, nearing eight, and my aunt, well past nine, and Miss Agatha, fourteen, go far away before the law came to get them. My grandfather and my grandmother, still in the doorway, thought it was the worst thing they had ever heard. But as the evening dark-



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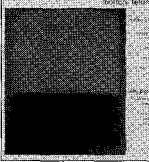
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ness came in and they lit the lamps and the candles and as the white man lay in the woods, they all knew the law would descend upon them. The law might even raise their dead and make them pay as well.

Along about midnight, after everyone had embraced them, the girls set out in two wagons, with my grandfather and his brother and Miss Agatha's father and his brothers. The men were armed. By late morning, the girls were near the Georgia border. By the morning of the next day, driven by other male relatives and friends, they were well through Georgia. It took a week for them to get into North Carolina, carried by new wagons and horses driven by other relatives and friends. The girls' belongings, what few there were, were always in the first wagon, and the girls, huddled together, were always in the second. All along the way, Miss Agatha cried to her companions that she was sorry for doing this to them. "Forgive me," she said. "It ain't nothin but a little bitty old thing," my mother kept saying. Within two weeks, after wearing out four pairs of wagons and three teams of horses, they were in Washington, at the home of my grandfather's cousin. He and his family were waiting. A week before, he had received a telegram: "Package arriving."

When I returned to the living room, my mother was saying, "Now, he"—and she pointed at me—"wasn't too much trouble comin out, but, oh, your husband was too much, Joanne. Two days. Two long days. I'm bound for Heaven cause I've had my hell right here in Washington, D.C. But I will say"—and she pointed to me again—"that he made up for that easy birth by havin his share a colic. And, when he slept, he slept kinda like this," and my mother leaned her head to the side with one eye open and one eye shut.

"I had to keep one eye on you," I said.

She didn't miss a beat: "I hope you still sleep that way cause I ain't finished with you yet, boy. Just wait. Just you wait." Then to Joanne: "You see what war does? It makes a man lose all natural fear of his mother. Be thankful you havin girls."

I sat back in the chair with my Kool-Aid. They went on talking like that, my mother and my sister-in-law and her

twin girls just dying to come out. There is a moment that a man hungers for when he's boozing—the conductor has already escorted him to the best seat on the train. This happens somewhere, depending on the alcohol, along about the fifth sip. The view from that window is extraordinary; God knew his business that day. A woman sits across from him and only when he looks out the window does she look away. Otherwise, her eyes are always on him. Her blouse is tight and she shows just enough cleavage not to make herself out to be a tramp. He takes another sip, and emphatic waves of warmth come over him. The woman crosses her legs. She is not wearing old-lady stockings. Hers are sheer nylon, so the man can bear witness to the miracle of her legs. He raises his glass and tries to decide whether to look again at her legs or out the window at what God made just for him.

I went in to the office on Monday morning to continue clearing up. I was missing Sam, who had soothing words for every bad occasion. I worked away and all the while recited aloud the dead white woman's words.

A moll is gav vain ah rav und ah rabbit sin.

Zetcha kender lock gadank za tire vos ear lair rent doe.

I was nearing completion of the "S" files when I felt someone watching me. I turned around. Sam's wife, Dvera, was standing in the doorway. She was crying. I stood and asked if it was bad news about Sam. She took a while, but she eventually shook her head and covered her mouth with both hands. She continued to cry. I stayed near the window. This was all I needed before Alaska: a white woman crying and no witnesses to my innocence.

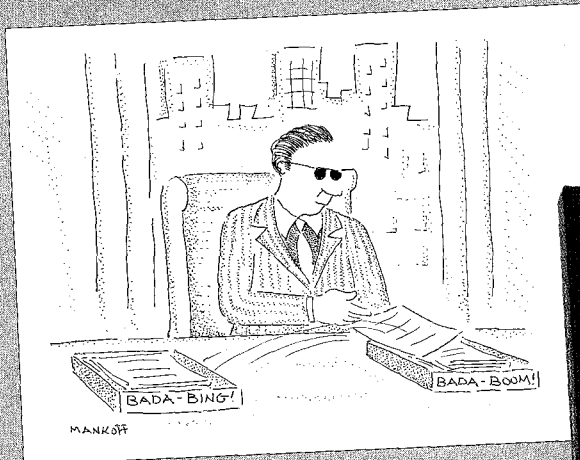
After several minutes, she pulled out a handkerchief that was tucked into her sleeve, and she stopped crying. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's been a long time since I heard those words." I didn't understand. I looked at the floor, but felt safe enough to put down the papers I was holding. "They were my father's words, his way of beginning stories to me. All his stories started that way. He used to tell me stories when the world got too much. Comforting, you know. Keeping the world away."

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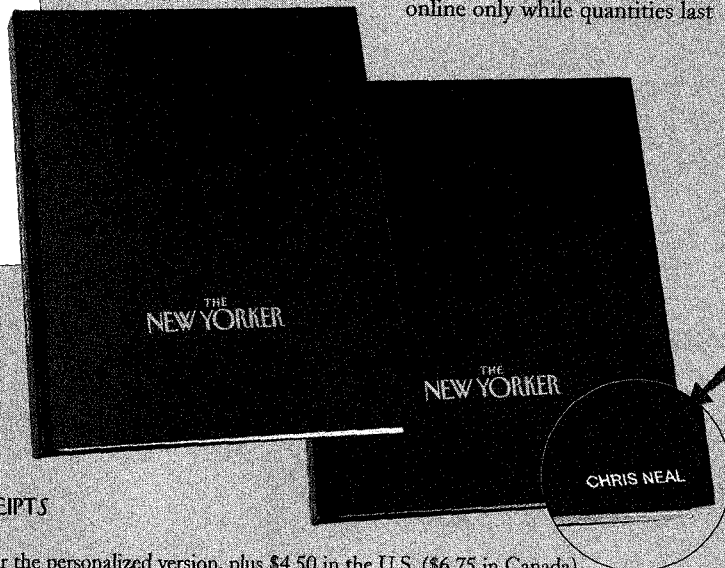
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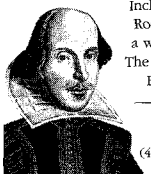
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I nodded. This was more than she had ever said to me in all the time I had been working there. Sometimes one moment sweeps aside everything you ever thought about a person.

"Where did you hear those words?" she asked. I told her about the white woman. "I remember hearing about her, but I didn't know you were there." She looked long at me and said, "Let me see something." She turned with her fat ankles and went upstairs.

I wanted to leave now. Files or no files. The dead woman's words were loud in my head. Dvera Jaffe came back after about an hour. "Miriam Sobel," she said. "She was in my brother's congregation. For a week they didn't know what had happened to her. Young as she was, her mind had been going for a long time. She would disappear at times, trying to get back to Russia, back home."

Now that I had a name to go with my memory, her dying words were louder than ever. In my head, the woman Miriam Sobel rose up and stood in the streetcar tracks, just as she had before she began to fall, and set her wig in place.

The end of it all came rather quickly after that.

On Thursday, I went to Mojo's. I asked Mojo's wife who might have supplied Ike's stuff. Harriet had a quick answer—a man named Fish Eyes. "But he died two months ago. If you thinkin what I think you're thinkin, you could be right," she said. "Fish Eyes would kill God if he owed him money. He went back to Georgia, where he had people. God's cancer took a long time killin him."

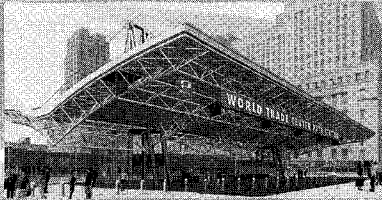
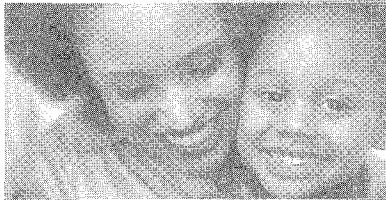
By then I had talked to about fifteen people and I was tired of Ike and his murder. I wanted Alaska. I took a beer and sat in a booth and mumbled Miriam Sobel's last words. Not the mixed-up English ones I thought she had said but the Yiddish. "*Amohl iz gevayn a rov und a rebetzin.*" The English had died the moment Dvera told me the Yiddish. "*Zet zhe, kinderlach, gedenk-zhe, teireh, vos ir lert' doh.*" After a second beer, I began fashioning a story that would let me go off to Alaska with as clear a conscience as a man like me could expect. I figured it wouldn't hurt anyone if I told Miss Agatha that it had probably been

Fish Eyes who killed Ike. One bad man had killed another. That sounded good, and the first sip of the third beer confirmed it.

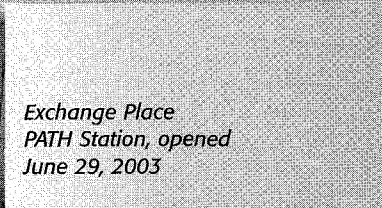
After four beers, I left Mojo's happy and headed down New York Avenue. I crossed First Street, passing Dunbar's field. I was nearing Kirby Street when Sheila Larkin and one of her many sisters came out of Kirby, heading toward me. They were only yards away. There was too much daylight for me to turn around and dash across New York Avenue. Damn! Damn! I kept thinking. The women walked on toward me, their arms linked, talking to each other as if their conversation were all that mattered. Well, I thought, we might as well get this shit over with right here and now. I hurried to compose what I would say: "I just felt like gettin on with some-thing else in my life, Sheila. It ain't really about you. I just gotta disentangle before Alaska." If she tried to hit me, I decided, I would let her get in one lick, but no more than that. My time with her was worth one lick, I figured. Any more than one and it was going to be war. They were about five feet away, and Sheila still hadn't noticed me. We all kept on. Then, in a moment, she and her sister were past me. And it wasn't as if they had unlocked arms and walked around me, or stayed arm in arm and walked together around me to the left or the right. It was simply as if they had walked through me, still talking, still arm in arm. It was like a blow to the chest. It took my breath away, and I leaned over to pull myself together. That didn't help, and I stood up straight and found myself stumbling, struggling. I kept thinking it might help to know what their conversation was about.

I went on a few feet more, and at last I sat on the curb at Kirby. The world took its sweet time righting itself, and I began to wish that I was on my train and the conductor was asking me, "Sir, may I fill your glass again?" Forget all of them, I thought, forget Miss Agatha and Sheila and her billions of sisters and forget my mother and Joanne with her belly full of girls. Forget every bitch that ever lived. Forget 'em! Just go to Alaska, where a man could be a real man without any bullshit. I looked at my watch, at the second hand going round and round. I pulled out the crown a tad and the sec-

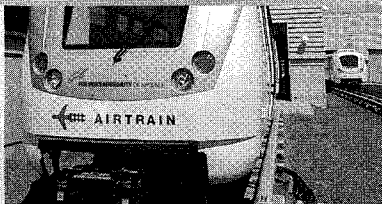
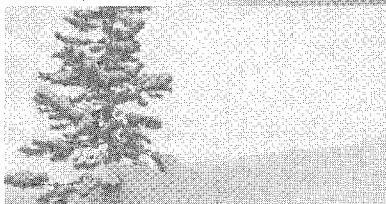
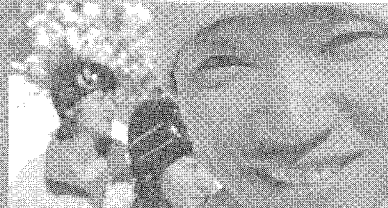
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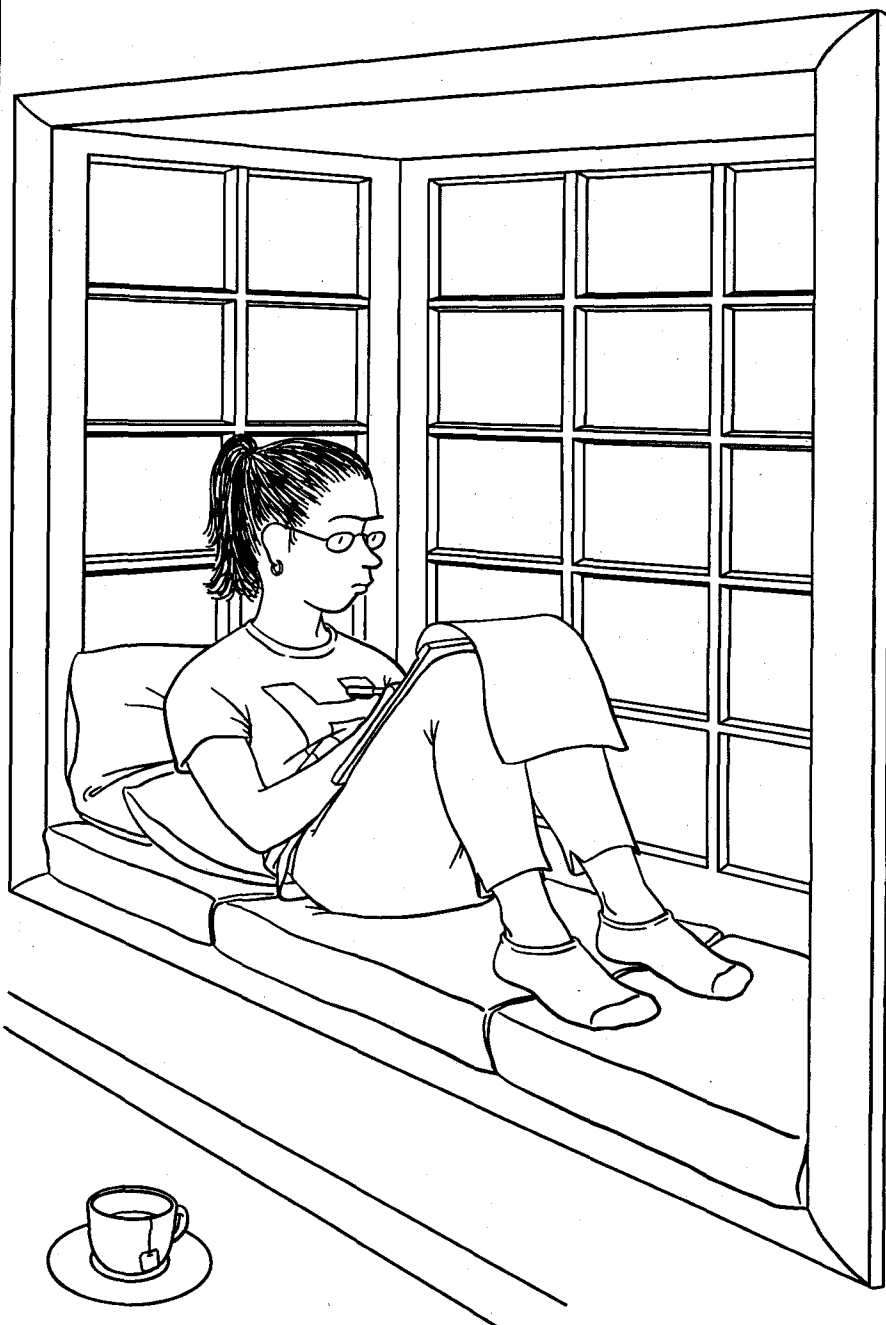
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ond hand stopped, just waited for me to start things up again. I told the conductor, "No." I saw Miss Agatha at her kitchen table brushing crumbs into her hand and she said she was sorry. I told her it ain't nothin but a little bitty old thing.

I stood outside Miss Agatha's apartment door, resolved to tell her that it had been Fish Eyes. He was in Hell, anyway, so he wouldn't care—what's another twenty years in an eternity of fire?

My mother would have had something to say about that, about lying on someone sitting in Hell on a two-legged stool with his ankles crossed, but I didn't care. I was about to knock when I decided to go back down to Ike's place. I planned to tell Miss Agatha that I had gone over the place four times, and two real visits would make it easier to lie.

This time the door opened without any trouble. I gave a perfunctory look to every room, then went to the kitchen. How far, I wondered with a little cu-



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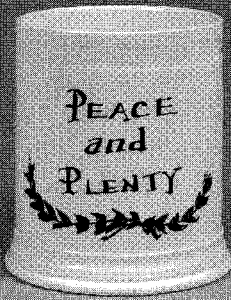
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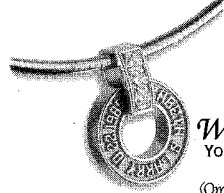
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riosity, had Ike's brain matter travelled after he was shot? I took a good look at the room's new paint and realized now what a shoddy job it was. I pulled out my pocketknife and scraped off paint around the kitchen window and began to see that someone had merely painted over the blood and everything else that had come out of Ike's head. I stepped back and then back some more. Fuck! Who would do such a shitty job of making over the place? No wonder Miss Agatha couldn't sleep at night—her son was still up and about just below her head. I opened the window and saw browned blood out on the edge of the sill. Why here, when the window should have been closed on the January night he was killed? And what power was in that blood for it to hang on for nearly two years?

I went out onto the fire escape and climbed up to Miss Agatha's place. Even after all the snow and sun and rain and time, there were faint bits of brown mid-way up the window frame, as if someone with bloody hands, just last night, had held on to it to steady himself before entering the apartment. Blood spilled with violence never goes away, I remembered my mother teaching Freddy and me, and you can see it if you have a mind to. I raised the window. Immediately, Alona's kid came up to the window. "Hi hi," she said, raising her hand to me. I looked at the other side of the frame and saw more bits of brown and there, at the frame, it all stopped. "Hi hi." I adjusted my eyes and looked into the kitchen and saw Alona watching me. Her arms were folded across her breasts, her legs slightly apart. I looked at both sides of the frame again. Seeing Alona standing there, impervious for all eternity, I was suddenly chilled in every part of my body. "Hi hi," the kid said. "Hi hi." Mountains did not stand the way Alona stood. Dear God, I thought, dear God. Of all Ike's crimes against her, what had been the final one? I became aware that in only a few steps Alona could be at the window and one powerful push could send me toppling over the fire escape. I became afraid. "Hi hi." The kid kept holding her hand up to me, so I took her hand and I let her help me into the room. The child was named for Miss Agatha. "Hi hi," she said. "Hi," I said.

The white man who tried to drag

Miss Agatha off into the woods when she was a child was never the same again, not in mind, not in body. He awoke in the woods three days later, caked with blood from head to toe, and picked himself up from what all the Negroes had believed was his deathbed. He spent his life saying he had been attacked by "somethin from God, somethin big, big like this." God called him into preaching, but each sentence he spoke for the rest of his life had no relation to the one before it or to the one after it. He found a home at a very tiny church with a blue door, with people who believed his speech made no sense because that was how God wanted it. Never to be translated into understandable human talk. The law stayed satisfied that it was a drifter from beyond Choctaw who had attacked him. A stranger from faraway over yonder. The law let it be, and the world the white people had made for themselves was set right again.

It came to me over the next few days that I would never find gold in Alaska, not even if my life depended on it. My mother was at first silent when I told her about the blood I'd found, when I told her who had killed Ike. She set a Tuesday-night plate of food before me as I sat at her kitchen table and bade me eat. Then she sat across from me with her cup, two-thirds milk and one-third coffee. She held the cup with both hands and sipped and fought back the tears. I rose to go to her, but she held me back. "You decide what you must tell Aggie and then leave her in peace after that," my mother commanded. "She knows what she knows. Maybe she needed someone like you in the world to know it, too. Tell her you know, if you got a mind to, and then leave us be. The only harm we ever done you was for your own good and you must not forget that."

I found a note on my desk from Dvera, Sam's wife, when I returned two days later to the office I shared with him. The note, written in beautiful script, had a translation of Miriam Sobel's last words: *Once upon a time there was a rabbi and his wife. . . . Listen, children, remember, precious ones, what you're learning here. . . .* Funny, I said to myself. I would never have thought the words meant that just



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from what I heard. A moll, a rabbit, and his sin . . .

I went upstairs, where I had never been, to Dvera's back office. The door was open. From the hallway, it seemed a very small room. But, once I was inside, it felt very large indeed, with everything a woman might need to be comfortable when she's by herself. The doilies on the couch reminded me of my mother's living room. Just inside the door was a samovar with a brilliant shine. Dvera was on the telephone, and, as it happened, it was Sam, still in Israel. I stepped all the way into the room. Above the light switch was a calendar with the time of the sunset noted at every Friday. She waved me over and handed me the telephone. Sam said he would be sad to see me go. I did not tell him that I would see Alaska only in some third life. After I'd said a few words to him, the line began to crackle and I felt it best to tell him goodbye. I gave the telephone back to Dvera. She began closing the conversation and pointed at a photograph sticking out of a large brown envelope on her desk. Then she giggled at something

Sam said and blushed. "Don't say that over the telephone," she said.

The photograph was of Miriam Sobel, younger than the dead woman by nine and two-thirds years, give or take a day or two. Two identical boys with forelocks had hold of her hands. I took the picture to the window, where the light was better. What part would the rabbi's wife play in the story? And, in the end, was the story really about her and not at all about the rabbi? I raised my eyes from the photograph of Miriam and saw a group of six little colored girls going down Eighth Street toward E, all of them in bright colors. My eyes settled on a girl in a yellow dress. She was in the middle of the group and she alone twirled as they walked, her arms out, her head held back, so that the sun was full upon her face. Her long plaits swung with her in an almost miraculous way. It was good to watch her, because I had never seen anything like that in Washington in my whole life. I followed her until she disappeared. It would have been nice to know what was on her mind. ♦

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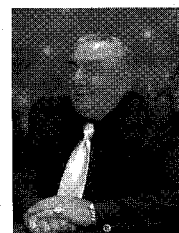
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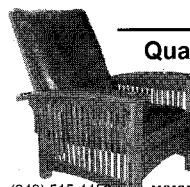
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THE CRITICS

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KNIGHT'S GAMBIT

The sacred profanity of "Don Quixote."

BY JAMES WOOD

The windmills that Don Quixote mistakes for giants have something in common with the madeleine that makes Marcel's memory buds salivate: both occur conveniently early in very long books that are, in English at least, more praised than read. And Cervantes may resemble Proust in another way. Both are comic writers, properly snagged in the mundane, whose fiction has too often been etherealized out of existence. Miguel de Unamuno, the relentlessly idealizing Spanish philosopher, considered "Don Quixote" a "profoundly Christian epic" and the true "Spanish Bible," and correspondingly managed to write about the novel as if not a single comic episode occurred in it. W. H. Auden thought that "Don Quixote" was a portrait of a Christian saint; and Unamuno's unlikely American supporter Harold Bloom, in his introduction to Edith Grossman's marvellous new translation (Ecco; \$29.95), reminds us that "Don Quixote," though it "may not be a scripture," nonetheless captures all humanity, as Shakespeare does—which sounds more like religious lament than like secular caution.

So it is worth reminding ourselves of the gross, the worldly, the violent, and, above all, the comic in "Don Quixote"—worth reminding ourselves that we are permitted the odd secular guffaw while reading it. If all of modern fiction comes out of the Knight's cape, one reason might be that Cervantes's novel con-

tains the major comic tropes, from the farcical to the delicately ironic. First, there is the comedy of egotism—the "But enough about my work, what do *you* think of my work?" grand manner, brilliantly exploited by Tartuffe, and by Jane Austen's Mr. Collins, who proposes to Elizabeth Bennet by listing all the ways in which he will benefit from marriage. Don Quixote is the great chivalric egotist, never more egotistical than when he appears to be most chivalrous. After he and poor Sancho Panza have suffered several adventures, including a beating by some drovers from Yanguas and being tossed in a blanket by a gang of men, Don Quixote has the nerve to tell his servant that these things are evil enchantments and so are not really happening to Sancho: "Therefore you must not grieve for the misfortunes that befall me, for you have no part in them." This is the knight who, finding that he can't sleep, wakes up his servant, on the principle that "it is in the nature of good servants to share the griefs of their masters and to feel what they are feeling, if only for appearance's sake." No wonder that Sancho elsewhere defines a knight-adventurer as "someone who's beaten and then finds himself emperor."

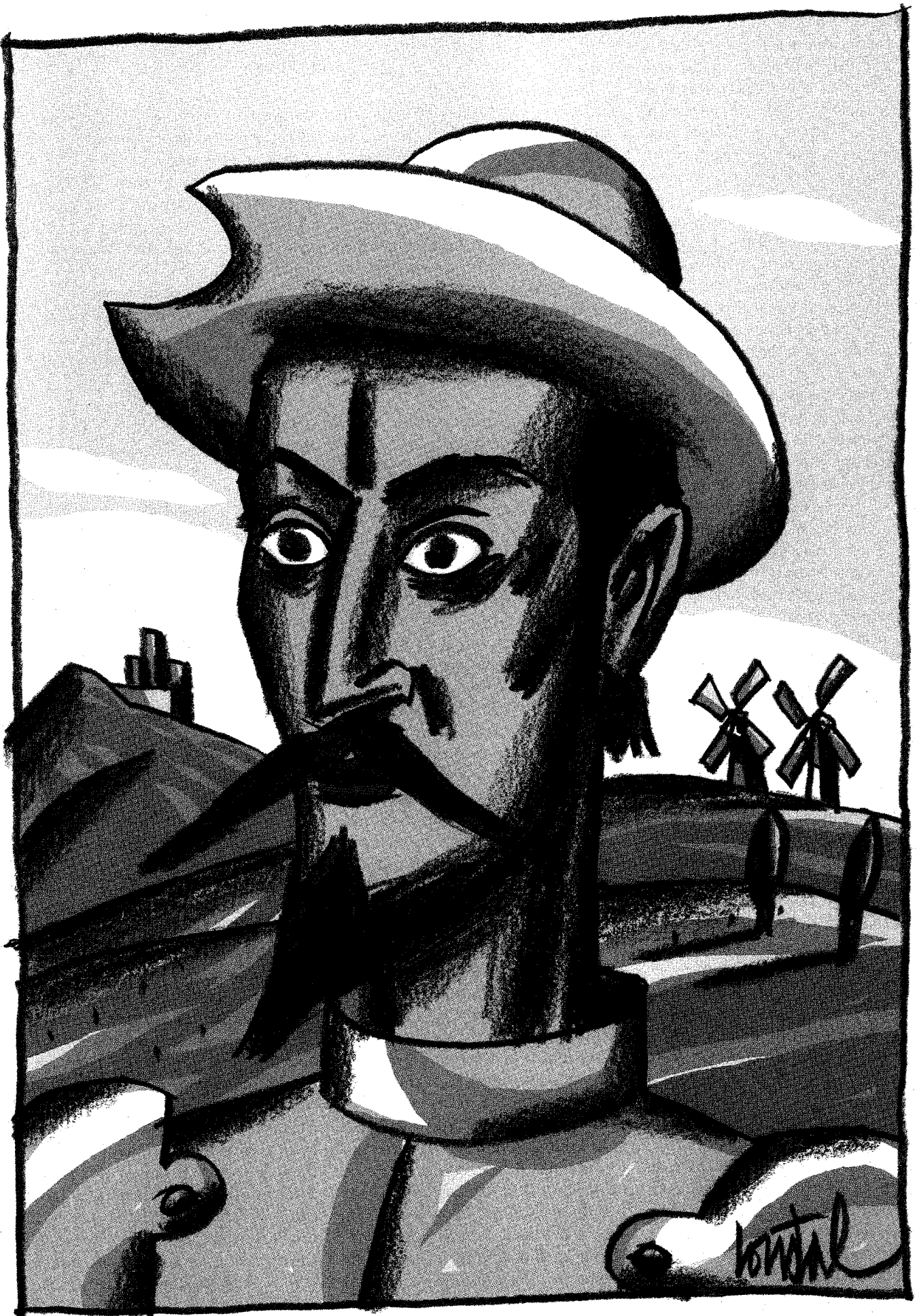
The egotist is never very good at laughing at himself, laughable though he often is. Cervantes has a wonderfully undulating scene in which the Knight and his servant are riding in the hills and are stopped by a loud noise. Sancho

Panza weeps with terror, and Don Quixote is moved by his tears. When they finally discover that the noise comes from "six wooden fulling hammers," pounding away in a cloth mill, Don Quixote looks at Sancho, and sees that "his cheeks were puffed out and his mouth full of laughter, clear signs that he would soon explode, and Don Quixote's melancholy was not so great that he could resist laughing at the sight of Sancho, and when Sancho saw that his master had begun, the floodgates opened with such force that he had to press his sides with his fists to keep from bursting with laughter." Don Quixote gets cross with Sancho for laughing at him, and hits him with his lance, complaining, "In all the books of chivalry I have read, which are infinite in number, I have never found any squire who talks as much with his master as you do with yours." As so often in "Don Quixote," the reader travels, in a page or two, through different chambers of laughter: affectionate, ironic, satirical, harmonious.

Edith Grossman's English sensitively captures these shifting registers, as we move from the Knight's ornate, sometimes pompous diction, via the narrator's fluent and funny recounting, to the earthy Sancho Panza and his muddier music. We are fortunate to have at present three excellent translations of "Don Quixote": in addition to Grossman's, there is John Rutherford's recent version for Penguin Classics (which takes more liberties with Sancho Panza's demotic Spanish than Grossman's does), and Burton Raffel's rendering for Norton. All are scholarly and elegant; in some places they are almost indistinguishable. But Grossman, who has translated García Márquez and Vargas Llosa, has produced the most distinguished, and the most literary, of them, and those qualities are amply displayed on every page.

"Don Quixote" is the greatest of all fictional inquiries into the relation between fiction and reality, and so a good deal of the novel's comedy is self-conscious, generated when one or more of the characters seems to step out of the book and appeal either to a nonfictional reality or directly to the audience

Cervantes's masterpiece, though extolled as "profoundly Christian," bristles with small blasphemies; it is the founder of secular comedy.



(a staple of pantomime performance and *commedia dell'arte*). The second volume of "Don Quixote," published in 1615, ten years after the first, throws irony on irony, as the Knight and his sidekick set out once again on their adventures, only to discover that they have become celebrities, because, in the interim, a book about their escapades has appeared—the volume we have just been reading. Cervantes delights in the epistemological hornet's nest into which Don Quixote and Sancho stumble in this second volume, as they assert their reality by recourse to a prior fiction whose culmination they are now enacting. But in the first volume, long before these complexities arise, Sancho, after being beaten by the drovers from Yanguas, pleads with his master, "Señor, since these misfortunes are the harvest reaped by chivalry, tell me, your grace, if they happen very often or come only at certain times." Sancho, as it were, winks at the audience, as if to say, "I know that I and my master are playing a role." The awful poignancy of the novel is that the Knight does not.

Sancho's request is perfectly reasonable: if violence is to be cartoonish, the laws of the genre should be observed, and we should be given fair notice—the banana skin seen in advance on the sidewalk. And, certainly, many of the cartoon conventions appear in "Don Quixote." The two heroes are never, it seems, seriously damaged, despite the thrashings they suffer. They always peel their flattened silhouettes off the ground. There is slapstick, too: at one moment, after Don Quixote has been attacked by the shepherds whose sheep he has attempted to kill, he asks Sancho to peer into his mouth to see how many teeth have been knocked out. As he is doing so, Don Quixote vomits in his face. Sancho promptly vomits back onto Don Quixote. There is plenty of such low comedy, including an inn that, like the cheese shop in the Monty Python sketch, is out of everything that is requested.

Nowadays, it can be tedious to wade through all the needlessly spilled blood: Don Quixote is pounded with a lance by a mule driver who beats him "as if he were threshing wheat"; another mule driver hits him so hard that his mouth is bathed in blood; "half an ear" is cut

See what the dust does when the sun—just risen for its last lap—raddles it Through and through. It glows. It is a million mullion-bits of radiance Blinding him to all the ordinary stuff—to trees and passing traffic, even To his child leaving for school, her mother disappearing in a haze of blue Through the hall door, the cats in their cave of sleep, middens of Christmas Gifts in corners, dishes in the sink. There's nothing to be seen of any of it, Once this brilliant dust becomes the living world and all he knows has been Scorched, torched to ash-scald by this apparition, although it all can still Make good, make estimable sense. But nothing (livid quick bliss it signals) Strikes home the way the dust does—leaving him deaf, dumb, blind, bedazzled.

—Eamon Grennan

off by a Basque adversary; his ribs are crushed by the drovers from Yanguas; the shepherds knock his teeth out; and he is stoned by the convicts he tries to release. Vladimir Nabokov found it cruel, and never really reconciled himself to the novel. In a Tarantino-tainted age, when "reality" always seems to get the heavy sideburns of quotation marks, such violence seems less cruel than pointedly unreal, the guarantee of its unreality being the unkillability of its victims. Some of the hysterical realism of modern writers like Pynchon and Rushdie seems to take its cue from Cervantes, the violence having been replaced by perpetual motion.

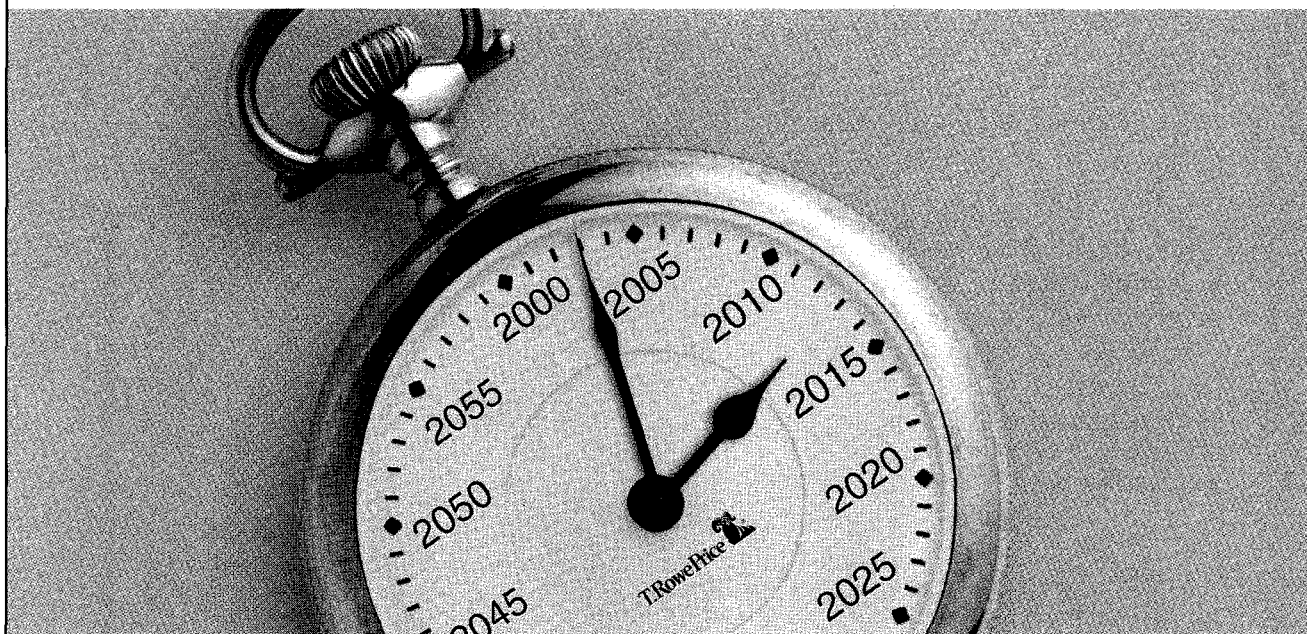
But Cervantes's violence makes another point, too. It is powerfully anti-idealizing. It shows us how the well-intentioned Knight ends up inflicting his good intentions on others. Near the beginning of the book, Don Quixote runs into Andrés, a boy who is being whipped by his master. Certain that his chivalric duty is to free the oppressed, he sends the master packing. Later, Andrés will turn up again, only to explain to Don Quixote and his friends that things turned out "very different from what your grace imagines." The boy explains that the master returned and flogged him all the harder, with each blow exulting in how he was making a fool of Don Quixote. As Andrés leaves, he says to Don Quixote that if the Knight ever comes upon him again, even if he's being torn to pieces, "don't help me and don't come to my aid." In another incident, Don Quixote attacks a group of priests accompanying a corpse.

Convinced that the corpse is that of a knight whose death he must avenge, he charges at the poor priests, breaking the leg of a young man. Quixote introduces himself as a knight whose "occupation and profession" is to "wander the world righting wrongs and rectifying injuries." The young man tartly points out that this can hardly be the case, since he was fine until Don Quixote came along and broke his leg, which will be "injured for the rest of my life; it was a great misadventure for me to run across a man who is seeking adventures."

Novel-writing has an entrepreneurial element: to invent a central story that can function at once as a plausible action and as an emblematic or symbolic one is akin to inventing a machine or product, a patent that will run and run. Think of Chichikov travelling around Russia buying up "dead souls" (Gogol warned a correspondent to keep the novel's subject matter secret, afraid of giving away his invention), or of Bellow's Herzog writing his mental letters to great thinkers and public figures. These are, above all, grand concepts. In "Don Quixote," a moderately prosperous Spanish gentleman, "one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing," becomes possessed, through reading the stories of chivalric adventures, by the idea that the knights-errant of folklore and fiction were real people; furthermore, it seems "reasonable and necessary to him, both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the nation, to become a knight-errant and

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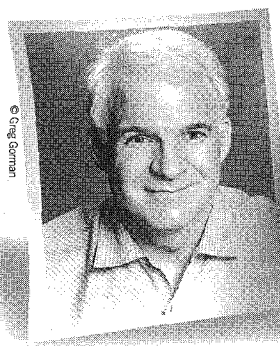
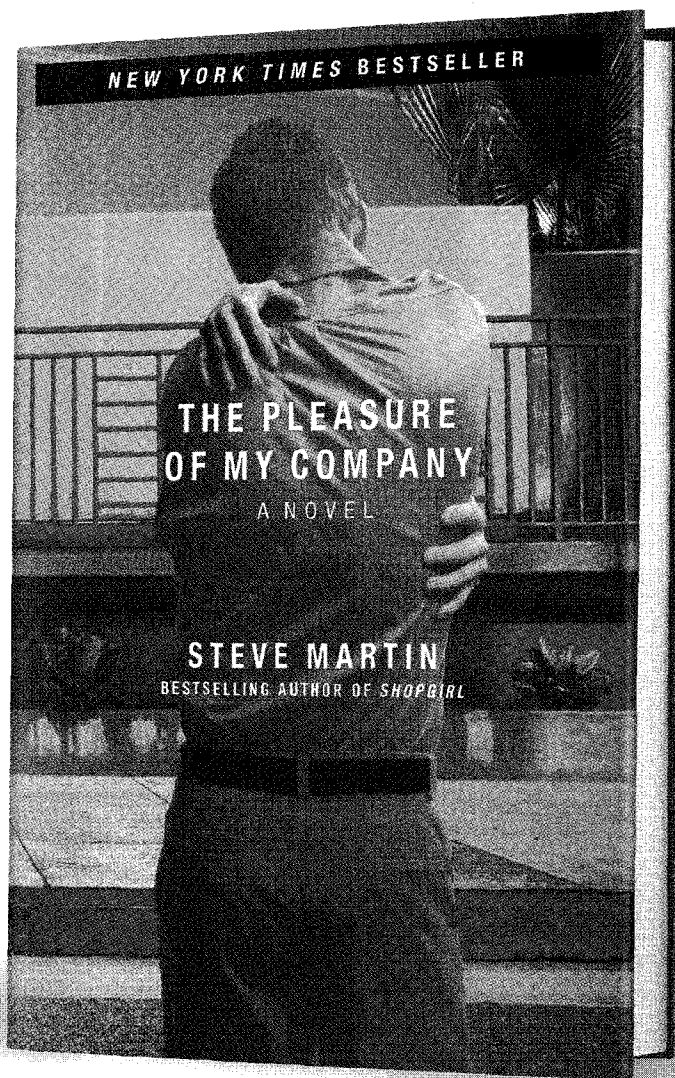
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When Cervantes invented Don Quixote's madness, and propelled him out onto the Castilian plains to enact it, he set ticking a little hermeneutical clock, by which, miraculously, we are still trying to tell time. Don Quixote's misreadings—his determination to read fiction as reality—license our millions of readings of him, because Cervantes kept the ambition of Don Quixote's journeying as wide and unspecific as possible. We know what Don Quixote thinks he is doing, but what is he really doing? What do his strivings represent? Do his misreadings of the world represent the comic battle of the unsullied Idea doing its best to exist in the brute world of Reality? Or for Idea and Reality should we read Spirit and Flesh? (Poor Sancho, in this scheme, is always seen as Flesh.) Or Literature and Reality? Or is Don Quixote an absolutist artist, striving to shape the recalcitrant world into his vision of it?

That Don Quixote's adventures have been so idealized, not to say Christianized, says more about the idealizing tendencies of Christianity than about Cervantes's novel. It is as if those determined to see Don Quixote as some kind of saint or missionary of the spirit had simply closed their eyes to the mayhem and suffering he causes. Andrés, the flogged boy, is right: Don Quixote's good intentions have perverse consequences. Perhaps Cervantes was interested, then, not only in the pious triumphs of his Knight but also in his pious defeats? And perhaps this interest, despite what may be said about Cervantes's own Catholicism, has a secular, even blasphemous bent? Dostoyevsky, who was very interested in Don Quixote, surely saw this when he created the figure of Prince Myshkin, the Idiot, whose Christlike actions have a way of contaminating the world around him. Prince Myshkin is not just too good for the world; he is dangerously too good.

When the young man accompanying the corpse complains to Don Quixote about his broken leg, the two fall into a kind of theological argument, which is really an argument about theodicy—about the ways in which we try to justify God's plan for the world. The young

man is a skeptic. He alleges that the dead man was killed by "God, by means of a pestilential fever." Don Quixote argues the conventional, orthodox position. "Not all things . . . happen in precisely the same way," he says, defending his decision to charge at the priests. For a brief, weird moment, it is as if the young man were likening the Knight to God, to a God whose ways we cannot know, yet whose decisions seem to inflict incomprehensible suffering on us.

Cervantes's novel bristles with little blasphemies like this; it is why the novel is the founder of secular comedy. Don Quixote is often said by his friends and acquaintances to resemble a preacher, a missionary, a holy man. He himself argues that he is doing Christ's work. When he falls into conversation with a canon, the man rebukes the Knight for reading books about chivalry, which are all folly and falsehood. He should instead read the Scriptures. But the great stories of knight-errancy are not fictions, Don Quixote replies. Who could deny, for instance, that Pierres and the fair Magalona really existed? For to this day one can see in the royal armory "the peg, slightly larger than a carriage pole, with which the valiant Pierres directed the wooden horse as he rode it through the air." The canon denies ever having seen this, but the damage is done. Blasphemy hangs like mirage heat. Don Quixote has just defended the reality of ostensible fiction by arguing from the existence of relics. And the logic is unavoidable: if mere fictions can be taken to be real on the basis of relics, then religious relics, commonly used to prove the veracity of religion, may be fictions, too. This, in a Catholic country in the midst of Counter-Reformation fervency! Later, Don Quixote will argue that the folkloric "giant Morgante" must have existed because we all believe—don't we?—that the Biblical Goliath existed. Cervantes joins that select company of writers, including Milton, Montaigne, and Pierre Bayle, who delight in slipping blasphemy in through the tradesmen's entrance while noisily welcoming divinity at the front gate.

This kind of epistemological teasing continues, as Don Quixote and Sancho find themselves having to prove that

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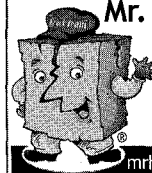


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"He was never one to waste words."

they are the legendary figures they claim to be. It is a shame that many readers never get to this second volume, which is both funnier and more affecting than the first. A rough analogy of its action might go like this: Jesus Christ is wandering around first-century Palestine, trying to convince people that he is the true Messiah. It is a difficult task, because John the Baptist, instead of preparing the way for the Messiah, has claimed that he is the true Messiah, and has gone and got himself appropriately crucified on Calvary. Since many people have heard of John's death and resurrection, Jesus finds himself being skeptically tested by his audience: can he perform this and that miracle? Moreover, when Jesus hears that John has been crucified on Calvary, he decides to prove his authenticity by changing his plans: he will not now be crucified on Calvary, but will instead travel to Rome to be eaten by lions. Tired, and deeply saddened by the unexpected explosion of his greatest dreams, he sets out for Rome with his dearest disciple and right-hand man, Peter. But Peter, taking pity on him, gets together with some of the disciples and persuades Jesus to give up this Messiah lark, and retire to somewhere nice, like Sorrento. Jesus meekly obeys, arrives in Sorrento, and immedi-

ately falls sick and dies, but not before renouncing all claims to divinity and announcing his atheism.

Such a Biblical analogy might be the easiest way to decipher the densely subtle games Cervantes plays in the second volume. Don Quixote and his servant are now literary celebrities, because of the publication of Cervantes's first volume, and people want to meet them, put them to the test. Of course, the famous duo have no idea in what light they were depicted by Cervantes, so, in effect, people are laughing behind their back. Since celebrities prompt mimicry, there is a rival Don Quixote now claiming that he is the real thing, and that our Knight—that is, Cervantes's—is a pretender. But, in addition to all this, Cervantes's novel did, in the real world, inspire an imitation, a book entitled "The Second Volume of the Ingenious Knight Don Quixote de la Mancha," published in 1614 by one Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, about whom little is known. Cervantes was already well into the writing of his second volume when he heard about Avellaneda's fraud, and he decided to incorporate it into his own novel. In Chapter 59, Don Quixote hears, through a bedroom wall, two men discussing Avellaneda's book. He is outraged, and quizzes the men

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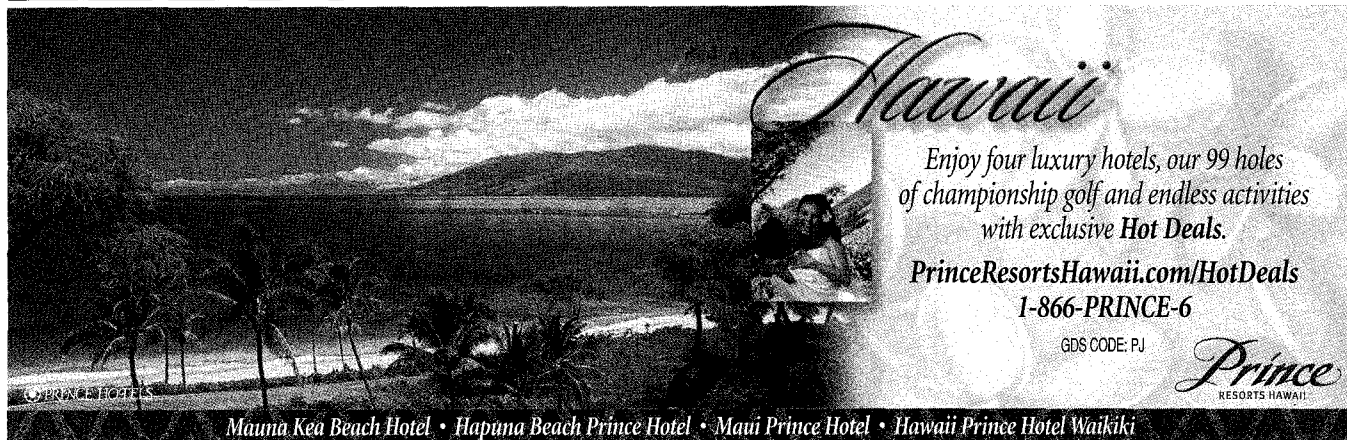
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about it. When he learns that in Avelaneda's account Don Quixote travels to Saragossa, he decides to travel not to Saragossa (where he had indeed been intending to go) but to Barcelona, "and in this way I shall proclaim the lies of this modern historian to the world, and then people will see that I am not the Don Quixote he says I am."

Cervantes's great ironies are false horizons, appearing one after the other. Two fictional characters, in order to prove their "reality," must appeal to a prior fiction written by the same writer who has now created this second volume of fictional escapades. These fictional characters must then argue with other fictional characters that they are Cervantes's characters and not Avellaneda's. So there is the novel we are reading (Volume II); there is the novel that first created these figures (Volume I); and there is a rival novel about similarly named characters. These three books merge to rob "reality" of its empirical treasure. Reality is simply another broken wall, apparently protecting nobody from skepticism's ravages.

Yet at the moment when Cervantes is at his most playful and self-referential, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are at their most real. This is the book's great paradox. The second volume belongs to Sancho, who becomes wiser and funnier as the book progresses. His love for Don Quixote is tearfully manifest. And Don Quixote is fighting for his life—which is also to say that he is fighting for his fictionality. It is desperately important for Don Quixote that he be who he says he is, and that everyone believe him. When he gets a traveller, Don Álvaro Tarfe, to agree that he is the real Don Quixote and not Avellaneda's, and forces him to sign a certificate to this effect, we laugh but we also shiver at the awfulness of it. Italo Svevo was perhaps thinking of this moment when he had his comic hero, Zeno, get his doctor to sign a certificate of sanity. Zeno presents it to his father, who, with tears in his eyes, says, "Ah, then you really are mad!" The reader, with tears in his eyes, says the same as Don Quixote flourishes his certificate.

A fantasy that seemed, in the novel's first volume, sometimes a lark, sometimes tedious, often unfathomable becomes, in the second volume, something

without which neither Don Quixote nor anyone else can live. All of us want Don Quixote to pursue his madness. We have come to believe in it, partly because, as in Shakespeare, we are made to believe in a character's reality when he himself believes in it so strongly, and partly because we no longer know precisely what "belief" entails. By the end of the book, we have become little Quixotes, reared on a fictional account of a knight-errant's escapades. We are willing fantasists, unsure of our ground.

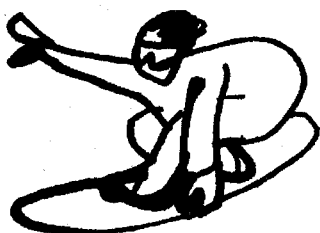
It is a tremendous shock when Don Quixote decides to head for home—to retire from his adventuring and become a shepherd. It is an even greater shock when he suddenly dies. He has a fever, is in bed for six days. He sleeps, awakes, and announces himself cured of his madness. He denounces all the "profane histories of knight errantry." In one of the greatest comic sentences in the whole book, Cervantes writes that those present, hearing this, "undoubtedly believed that some new madness had taken hold of him." Don Quixote calls for Sancho Panza, and asks his forgiveness for "making you fall into the error into which I fell, thinking that there were and are knights errant in the world." "Don't die, Señor" is Sancho's tearful response. Don Quixote makes his will, leaving some money to Sancho, lives on another three days, and then, "surrounded by the sympathy and tears of those present, gave up the ghost, I mean to say, he died."

The poverty of the language here, its near-clumsiness and refusal to plume itself up into magnificence, is moving, as if Cervantes himself were overcome with grief at the passing of his creation. Don Quixote has become his own fiction of himself, and cannot live without it. As soon as he renounces it, he must wither away. Yet Sancho Panza remains. And who is Sancho? Earlier in the book, Don Quixote says of Sancho, admiringly, that "he doubts everything and he believes everything." Isn't this a fine description of the reader of this novel? Sancho is Don Quixote's reader, who lives on as the book's readers do, all-believing and all-doubting, made both faithful and skeptical by the novel's fidelities and skepticisms, happy inheritors of the Knight's last will and testament. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Pompeii, by Robert Harris (*Random House*; \$24.95). Harris's historical novel begins in August, 79 B.C., two days before the eruption of Vesuvius. The hero is Marcus Attilius Primus, an aqueduct engineer who is investigating a mysterious blockage, apparently related to recent tremors, in the aqueduct that runs from Misenum to Pompeii. In addition to landing this prestigious job—it's the Empire's longest aqueduct—he has met a young woman who has the "same darkness of hair" and the "same voluptuousness of figure" as his dear departed first wife. The only problem is her father, a corrupt and powerful millionaire who is stealing from the water supply. Although the plot seems to owe more to "Chinatown" than to Pliny, Harris garnishes the action with seductive period detail, and the novel comes alive in the main event, a cataclysmic explosion with a thermal energy equal to a hundred thousand Hiroshimas.

Genesis, by Jim Crace (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*; \$23). Lix, an actor, is so virile that he impregnates every woman he beds; unfortunately, the story he inhabits is a sterile exercise. Lix's propagation problem—in the book's opening chapter, his sixth child is accidentally conceived on the front seat of a car—is the kind of premise that might have fuelled an amusing magic-realist novel. Crace's agenda, however, is to deglamorize the act of procreation, and to tutor his readers about the emotional dislocations that divide men and women even as their bodies conjoin. Lix's erotic life is no fun: his partners criticize his lovemaking skills and demand intimacy that he cannot provide. His sexual history is recounted not as a comic picaresque but as a pompous lecture, full of strained aphorisms ("It isn't love that's blind, it's alcohol"; "Chatter is



the cheapest contraceptive") and meandering vignettes about mismatched desire.

Giving Up the Ghost, by Hilary Mantel (*Henry Holt*; \$23). This bleak memoir by a prolific British novelist recounts her upbringing in the North of England in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Mantel's domineering stepfather has contempt for her intellectual aspirations and for her constant nausea and migraines. When, at college, she takes her symptoms to a doctor, he prescribes antidepressants and sends her on to a psychiatrist, who, in turn, suggests that she give up her studies to work for her mother selling dresses. Finally, at twenty-seven, she is diagnosed with severe endometriosis. Her uterus is removed, and hormone replacements cause extreme weight gain. For most of her life, she has struggled with emaciation, but strangers increasingly assume she is pregnant, now an impossibility. While Mantel's prose shimmers with suppressed anger, the reader might have preferred a story more plainly shaped, and one that gave some sense of the growth of her remarkable imagination.

Franklin and Winston, by Jon Meacham (*Random House*, \$29.95). After their first meeting, in 1918, Roosevelt said that Churchill was "a stinker"; Churchill didn't even remember Roosevelt. But by their next exchange, in 1939, Churchill was convinced that Britain's future depended on getting Roosevelt to like him. Meacham's engaging account argues that personal bonds between leaders are crucial to international politics. He draws heavily on diaries and letters to describe a complicated courtship and, at times, seems amazed at what Winston is willing to put up with from Franklin. Churchill paints a landscape for the President, sings for him, and agonizes when his notes go unanswered; Roosevelt teases him in front of Stalin, criticizes him to reporters, and eventually breaks his heart with a diverging vision of the postwar world. But Churchill never gives up, and he later recalled, "No lover ever studied the whims of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt."

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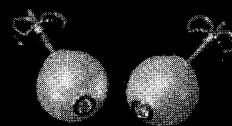
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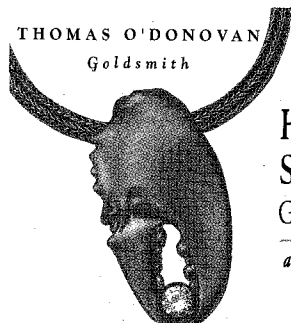
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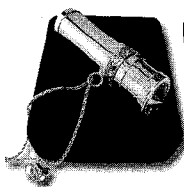


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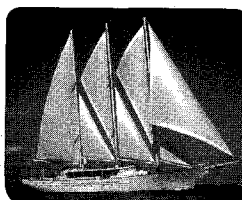
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THE THEATRE

BLACKOUT

Tracey Scott Wilson on race, ambition, and journalistic ethics.

BY HILTON ALS



Erika Alexander, as Yvonne, is a "what if" meditation on the part of the author.

At times, whether one "likes" a play matters less than the way in which it resonates in the imagination long after the drama has unfolded, the sets have been struck, and life has returned to what it is, or might be. After seeing Tracey Scott Wilson's "The Story" (at the Public), I was so taken by the stark poeticism of her dramatic form that I couldn't tell whether my high was based on admiration for the play as a whole or for Wilson's literary ear in particular. Such confusion, all too rare in today's American theatre, is welcome. If nothing more, "The Story" showcases a singular new voice, one that will only grow and deepen as Wilson continues to explore her rich, complicated background.

Wilson, who is thirty-six years old, made her way to the theatre after a num-

ber of false starts. As a teen-ager, she took a journalism class at Rutgers but found the field's necessary restrictions—facts make the story—limiting. Turning to fiction, she earned a master's degree in creative writing at Temple in 1992, and then tried to write a novel, but stalled. Next, she took a playwriting course. There she found her métier; she wrote a number of short plays, and was awarded a fellowship at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1998. "The Story" is her third full-length play to be produced in Manhattan. Wilson's doggedness is due perhaps to her background: growing up in a middle-class black family in Newark, New Jersey, Wilson said in a recent *Times* interview, she "understood the need not to fail," adding, "You had to be the best." Being "the best" also meant, of course, being fettered by a

GRAHAM WILSON

number of expectations, the most insidious of which was the pressure not to upset the black status quo by becoming something other than a doctor or a lawyer—acceptable roles, modelled on white images of “success.” In Wilson’s social milieu, if you had to become a writer (the most errant-minded occupation of all), you were expected at least to become a university writer-in-residence or a reporter on the staff of a respected newspaper—institutions that would legitimize the need to speak. This push toward professional conformity in black American culture is an interesting and sad conundrum, one as old as Booker T. Washington. While trying to represent the world of her imagination, Wilson had to contend with the voices of respectability in her head. It’s a tension that is rarely represented on the page, let alone on the stage. To speak of it is, in a way, a criticism of the tribe, of one’s own flesh and blood. Nevertheless, recent years have brought us Darryl Pinckney’s novel “High Cotton” and Suzan-Lori Parks’s play “Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom,” two works that address what it means to be “the best” and how the illusion remains just that.

Wilson shares Parks and Pinckney’s concerns, but less directly. She has said that “The Story” was inspired by the case of Janet Cooke, who, in 1981, at twenty-six, was one of the few black journalists at the Washington Post. That year, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for a feature story she had written about Jimmy, an eight-year-old heroin addict. Jimmy, it turned out, did not exist. Two days after winning the prize, Cooke was forced to return it. Editors at the Post discovered that she not only had fabricated the piece but had also embellished her academic résumé. Like Wilson, Cooke was a daughter of the black bourgeoisie who struggled to balance her desire to write fiction with the pressure to conform to social conventions. While Wilson became an artist and survived, Cooke clung to the notion of respectability and destroyed her career. In a sense, the heroine of “The Story,” Yvonne (Erika Alexander), is a self-portrait, a profound “what if” meditation on the part of the author.

Yvonne is a young reporter at a Boston newspaper, the *Daily*. She was hired on the strength of her résumé (“Harvard. Summa cum laude. Sorbonne”) and on the recommendation of her white

lover, an editor named Jeff (Stephen Kunken). Jeff is now worried that his relationship with Yvonne will have a corrosive effect on their careers, particularly when it comes to two prominent black members of the staff: an editor, Pat (Phylicia Rashad), and a reporter, Neil (Damon Gupton), who work on the Outlook section of the paper, which aims at offsetting black news stories (a.k.a. crime stories) with black human-interest stories—generally, articles about the indignities blacks suffer when black crime, and the white paranoia it generates, casts its pall over the Charles River. But Yvonne, who doesn’t want to be ghettoized as a reporter, doesn’t want to work in journalism’s ghetto. “I don’t plan on being at *Ebony*/*Jet* Junior for long,” she tells Jeff. “Soon, I’ll be at Metro with you, then on to the national desk.” Being “with” Jeff is, for Yvonne, a way of being “like” Jeff: white and male and thus free to pursue her own ambitions without having to be “nice” or grateful for the opportunities offered to her. But Jeff is nice—he’s sensitive and tentative, an almost stellar mensch. By making him Yvonne’s love interest, Wilson brings an interesting question to the fore: What would Yvonne be like if she were white and male? How much of the self is based on personality, and how much on the racial and sexual role-playing we have to perform to be recognized in our society?

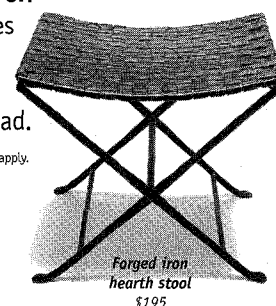
Pat and Neil are on to Yvonne, and she knows it. “It’s like grammar school all over again and all the cool black kids hate me,” she tells Jeff. “Something in my walk. Something in my talk tells them I’m not ‘down.’” One gets the sense that Yvonne has always been able to level one set of prejudices against another to get ahead—that is, she knows how to play her own perverse version of the race card. She complains to whites about blacks to draw them in—and to consolidate her power. Yvonne knows that her bread is buttered on the white side, and she spreads a thick layer of self-pity on it, too. If whites see her as a victim because she’s black and a woman, why not play victimhood to her advantage? Whites, Yvonne reasons, are much less likely than blacks like Pat and Neil to see through her elaborate act.

But eventually her deceptions are exposed. Yvonne, who is living in her own invented “class,” actually grew up in what she calls “borderline ghetto” and

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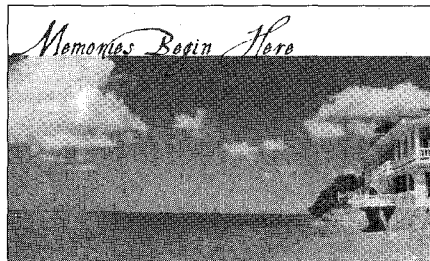
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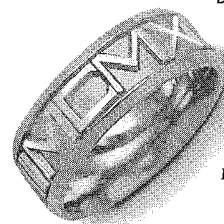
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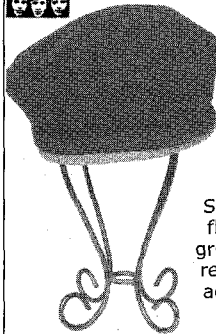


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dropped out of the University of Massachusetts in her first year. When Jeff asks her why she lied, she replies dully, "My father had expectations." Pat, who really is middle class, was also born to a stifling set of expectations; she simply interpreted them differently. As she sees it, her job is not to leave her race behind but to represent it fairly and well. Wilson draws a sharp parallel between these two women, and the ways in which they bear up—or crumble—under the weight of their race. Pat is all no-nonsense efficiency, while Yvonne walks with the tight, defensive gait of a liar who has to watch not only her back but also the eyes of her interlocutors. She is constantly trying to anticipate what they want to hear in time to make it up. Rashad, who has the quiet authority of the legendary American star Sada Thompson, is especially fine as Pat. Stolid and unfussy, she can listen without distracting the audience. In her dealings with Yvonne, Pat conveys the reserved force of a parent who accepts her children's flaws as gracefully as their triumphs.

On the other hand, it's a little difficult to locate Alexander's performance—perhaps because she's supposed to be, to some degree, emotionally opaque. Alexander has the right look and sound for the part—she's thin and neat, with barely suppressed hysteria in her voice and eyes—but she lacks the inner tension to make the role as sickening as it should be. We've all known some version of Yvonne: the girl who plays to authority while clambering over the heads of those she considers beneath her. Yvonne is vengeful, a wolf in Barbie's clothing, and we should feel nothing but horror at her contrived "niceness." That Alexander is not quite up to her character's complexity may have something to do with the director, Loretta Greco, whose staging feels hesitant at times, as if she were intimidated by the beauty and technical flair of Wilson's script. Wilson, with her cross-cutting dialogue, quick blackouts, and characters who speak their unconscious thoughts, owes something to Eugene O'Neill's "Strange Interlude," and also to Bob Fosse's documentary-like exploration of truth "Star 80." Wilson uses a failed writer's lies as a jumping point to her own voice. It's a voice that is deeply emotional, deeply intellectual, and deeply musical—the most modern blues imaginable. ♦

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE RING AND THE RINGS

Wagner vs. Tolkien.

BY ALEX ROSS

Early in "The Fellowship of the Ring," the first film in Peter Jackson's monumental "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, the wizard Gandalf finds himself alone in a room with the trinket that could end the world. It lies gleaming on the floor, and Gandalf regards it with an attitude of fascinated fear. The audience feels a chill that neither Jackson's vertiginous camera angles nor Ian McKellen's arching eyebrows can fully explain. The Ring of Power extends its grip through the medium of music, which is the work of the gifted film composer Howard Shore. In the preceding scenes, an overview of the habits of hobbits, Shore's music had an English-pastoral, dance-around-the-May-pole air, but when the ring begins to do its work a Wagnerian tinge creeps in—fittingly, since "The Lord of the Rings" dwells in the shadow of Wagner's even more monumental "Ring of the Nibelung." J. R. R. Tolkien's fans have long maintained a certain conspiracy of silence concerning Wagner, but there is no point in denying his influence, not when characters deliver lines like "Ride to ruin and the world's ending!"—Brünnhilde condensed to seven words.

Shore manages the admirable feat of summoning up a Wagnerian atmosphere without copying the original. He knows the science of harmonic dread. First, he lets loose an army of minor triads, or three-note chords in the minor mode. They immediately cast a shadow over the major-key music of the happy hobbits. (A digression for those who skipped grade-school music class or never had one: Why does the minor chord make the heart hang heavy? First,

you have to understand why the major triad, its fair-haired companion, sounds "bright." It is based on the spectrum of notes that arise naturally from a vibrating string. If you pluck a C and then divide the string in half, in thirds, in fourths, and so on, you will hear one by one the clean notes that spell C major. Wagner's "Ring" begins



with a demonstration: from one deep note, wave upon wave of majestic harmony flows. The C-minor triad, however, has a more obscure connection to "natural" sound. The middle note comes from much higher in the overtone series. It sets up grim vibrations in the mind.)

The minor triad would not in itself be enough to suggest something as richly sinister as the Ring of Power. Here Wagner comes in handy. He famously abandoned the neat structures of classical harmony for brooding, meandering strings of chords. In the

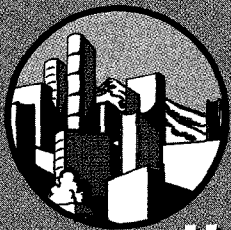
"Ring," special importance attaches to the pairing of two minor triads separated by four half-steps—say, E minor and C minor. Conventional musical grammar says that these chords should keep their distance, but they make an eerie couple, having one note (G) in common. Wagner uses them to represent, among other things, the Tarnhelm, the ring's companion device, which allows its user to assume any form. Tolkien's ring, likewise, makes its bearer disappear, and Shore leans on those same spooky chords to suggest the shape-shifting process.

In "The Return of the King," which opens this week, Shore's music keeps pace with the burgeoning grandeur of the filmmaking. When the hobbits escape Mt. Doom, Renée Fleming sings, in Elvish. As the evil lord Sauron comes to grief, the dusky harmonies of the ring give way to their mirror image in the major key. There is an abrupt harmonic shift that has the effect of sun breaking through clouds. You would have thought that sometime between the birth of Stravinsky and the publication of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" such echt-Wagnerian material would have gone out of fashion, but there is life in the fat lady yet.

Tolkien refused to admit that his ring had anything to do with Wagner's. "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceased," he said. But he certainly knew his Wagner, and made an informal study of "Die Walküre" not long before writing the novels. The idea of the omnipotent ring must have come directly from Wagner; nothing quite like it appears in the old sagas. True, the Volsunga Saga features a ring from a cursed hoard, but it possesses no executive powers. In the "Nibelungenlied" saga, there is a magic rod that could be used to rule all, but it just sits around. Wagner combined these two objects into the awful amulet that is forged by Alberich from the gold of the Rhine. When Wotan steals the ring for his own godly purposes, Alberich places a curse upon it, and in so doing he speaks of "the lord

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of the ring as the slave of the ring." Such details make it hard to believe Tolkien's disavowals. Admit it, J.R.R., you used to run around brandishing a walking stick and singing "*Nothing! Nothing!*" like every other besotted Oxford lad.

It is surely no accident that the notion of a Ring of Power surfaced in the late nineteenth century, when technologies of mass destruction were appearing on the horizon. Pre-modern storytellers had no frame of reference for such things. Power, for them, was not a baton that could be passed from one person to another; those with power were born with power, and those without, without. By Wagner's time, it was clear that a marginal individual would soon be able to unleash terror with the flick of a wrist. Oscar Wilde issued a memorable prediction of the war of the future: "A chemist on each side will approach the frontier with a bottle." Nor did the ring have to be understood only in terms of military science. Mass media now allowed for the worldwide destruction of an idea, a reputation, a belief system, a culture. In a hundred ways, men were forging things over which they had no control, and which ended up controlling them.

Tolkien began "The Lord of the Rings" in the wake of the First World War, whose carnage he experienced firsthand, and he finished it in the wake of the Second. In both wars, he witnessed the wedding of Teutonic mythology to German military might. He bemoaned how the Nazis had corrupted "that noble northern spirit." You could see "The Lord of the Rings" as a kind of rescue

operation, saving the Nordic myths from misuse—perhaps even saving Wagner from himself. Tolkien tried, it seems, to create a kinder, gentler "Ring," a mythology without malice. The "world-redeeming deed," in Wagner's phrase, is done by the little hobbits, who have no territorial demands to make in Middle-earth and wish simply to resume their gardening. In the end, the elves give up their dominion, just as, in Wagner, the gods surrender theirs. Yet it is a peaceful transfer of power, not an apocalyptic one. The story ends not with the collapse of Valhalla but with the restoration of a wasted world.

It is probably heretical to suggest that the "Lord of the Rings" films surpass the books on which they are based. (Correspondence on this subject may be addressed to Alex Ross, The North Pole.) The books tell a fantastic story in a familiar style, but the movies transcend the apparent limitations of their medium in the same way that Wagner transcended the limitations of opera. They revive the art of Romantic wonder; they manufacture the sublime. I hope that at least a small fraction of the huge worldwide audiences for these films will one day be tempted into Wagner's world, which offers something else again. For Tolkien, myth is a window on an ideal world, both brighter and blacker than our own. For Wagner, it is a magnifying mirror for the average, desperate modern soul.

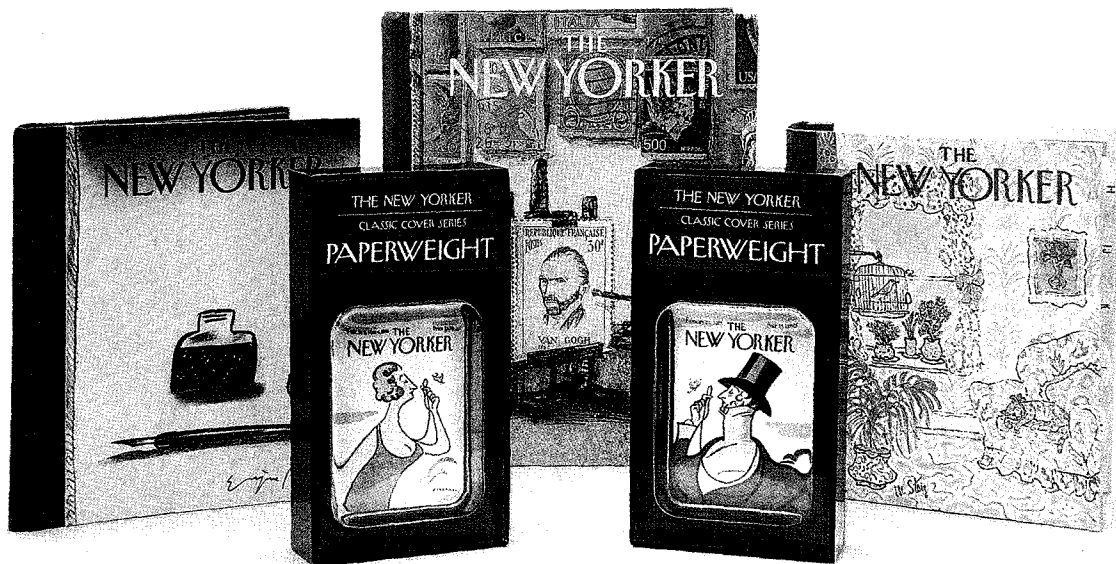
There is a widespread conception of Wagner's cycle as a bombastic nationalistic saga in which blond-haired heroes triumph over dwarfish, vaguely Jew-



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ish enemies. Wagner unquestionably left himself open to this interpretation, but the "Ring" is not at all what it seems. It is in fact a prolonged assault on the very idea of worldly power, the cult of the monumental—everything that we think of as "Wagnerian." At the beginning, the god Wotan is looking to expand his realm. But every step he takes to assert himself over the affairs of others, to make his will reality, leads inexorably to his downfall. He is marked from the outset, and the ring becomes a symbol of the corruption of his authority. Tolkien believes in the forces of good, in might for right. Wagner dismisses all that—he had an anarchist streak early on—and sees redemption only in love.

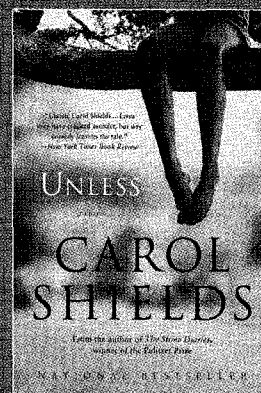
When Tolkien stole Wagner's ring, he discarded its most significant property—that it can be forged only by one who has forsworn love. (Presumably, Sauron gave up carnal pleasures when he became an all-seeing eye at the top of a tower, but it's hard to say for certain. Maybe he gets a kick out of the all-seeing bit.) The sexual opacity of Tolkien's saga has often been noted, and the films faithfully replicate it. Desirable people appear onscreen, and one is given to understand that at some point they have had or will have had relations, but their entanglements are incidental to the plot. It is the little ring that brings out the lust in men and in hobbits. And what, honestly, do people want in it? Are they envious of Sauron's bling-bling life style up on top of Barad-dûr? Tolkien mutes the romance of medieval stories and puts us out in self-abnegating, Anglican-modernist, T. S. Eliot territory. The ring is a never-ending nightmare to which people are drawn for no obvious reason. It generates lust and yet gives no satisfaction.

Wagner, by contrast, uses the ring to shine a light on various intense, confused, all-too-human relationships. Alberich forges the ring only after the Rhine maidens turn away his advances. Wotan becomes obsessed with it as a consequence of his loveless marriage; he buries himself in his work. Even after he sees through his delusions, and achieves a quasi-Buddhist acceptance of his powerlessness, he has nothing else to lean on, not even his Gandalfian

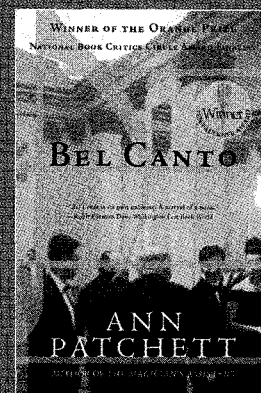
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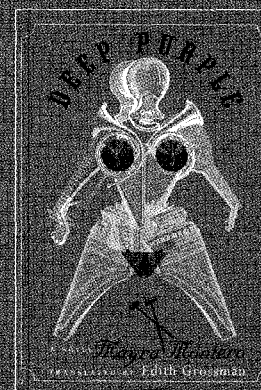
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staff, and wanders off into the night. Siegfried and Brünnhilde, lost in their love for each other, succeed in remaking the ring as an ordinary trinket, a symbol of their devotion. They assert their earthbound passion against Wotan's godly world, and thus bring it down. The apparatus of myth itself—the belief in higher and lower powers, hierarchies, orders—crumbles with the walls of Valhalla. Perhaps what angered Tolkien most was that Wagner wrote a sixteen-hour mythic opera and then, at the end, blew up the foundations of myth.

Admittedly, the notion of the "Ring" cycle as some sort of sexual hot-house can seem far-fetched when the operas are seen in performance. People like to think of Wagner as a lot of large people standing around and singing loudly, and they are not mistaken. The Met lacks a Heldentenor who looks even a little bit like Viggo Mortensen. But if in the opera house you sometimes notice a discrepancy between what you hear in the libretto and music and what you see onstage it is no less distracting than what moviegoers are asked to believe on a routine basis. You don't ask whether an elf could kill an oliphaunt, or even what an oliphaunt is; you go along with the premise. It is the same in opera. The premise is that performers trained as opera singers are going to assume action-hero roles. Squint a little and it's all fine.

The experience of film—and, in particular, of music in film—has probably had a prejudicial effect on the way people view live opera. They expect images to set the tone and music to match—"Mickey-Mousing," Walt Disney's composers called it. Howard Shore, in "The Lord of the Rings," practices the art of Mickey-Mousing at an exalted level. But in opera the music takes the lead, generating an imaginary landscape that directors and performers struggle to realize however they can. Not even Peter Jackson would be able to keep pace with Wagner's hurtling, hovering, ever-evolving musical images, although someday an opera house is certain to ask him to try. When I see the cycle at the Met next spring, I will close my eyes from time to time and imagine movie and opera fused—as the one "Ring" to rule them all. ♦

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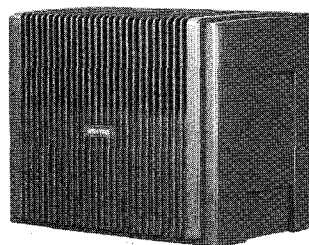
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"Cold Mountain," "Something's Gotta Give," "Mona Lisa Smile."

BY DAVID DENBY

In many ways, 2003, with its extensive dead zones, was a terrible year for big Hollywood movies. But it will also be remembered as a year in which a group of remarkable large-scale productions hit the theatres in its last couple of months like brilliant guests arriving late at a party. Among them are Clint Eastwood's "Mystic River," Peter Weir's "Master and Commander," and, now, Anthony Minghella's "Cold Mountain," which is not only a stunning popular entertainment but also, if you're keeping score, a much better movie about the South during the Civil War than "Gone with the Wind"—visionary, erotic, and tragic where the older movie is flossy, merely ambitious and self-important.

Minghella's adaptation of Charles Frazier's 1997 novel is about the backwash of warfare—the lawless, scrappy life that struggles to take shape behind the lines in an atmosphere of uneasy freedom. The frame of the story is simple enough. In 1861, in Cold Mountain, a town in the North Carolina Blue Ridge range, a young man known as Inman (Jude Law) meets Ada (Nicole Kidman), a beautiful and genteel minister's daughter. After a few awkward encounters and one heart-stopping kiss, Inman, along with all the other young men in Cold Mountain, runs off to fight the war. Three gruesome years later, badly hurt and with his spirit in shreds, he deserts his company after the battle of the Crater, at Petersburg, and tries to make his way home to a woman he barely knows. Inman says that the war has destroyed him, but, in our eyes, he has gained in understanding and become a man. At the same time, Ada, whose father has died, leaving her with a three-hundred-acre farm to run, has put some color in her face and some fight in her belly. The movie is held together by the idea that two callow young people, inspired by a half-remembered but exalted image of each other, can grow more powerful as

everything disintegrates around them.

An Englishman of Italian descent, Anthony Minghella has had his ups and downs over the years. Patricia Highsmith's nasty thriller material in "The Talented Mr. Ripley" was too calculating and narrow-focussed for him; the director of such dramas of infatuation and longing as "Truly, Madly, Deeply" and "The English Patient" is a star-dazed dreamer, and Frazier's richly textured novel is more his kind of thing. "Cold Mountain" is charged with scenes of yearning and irrational faith—flickering portents glimpsed at the bottom of a well; a blind man making prophecies—yet Minghella brings off this cheesy stuff so poetically that he cuts away the mold. He is neither a gusher nor a mystic nor a decorator; he has the strength of a true romantic imagination, the conviction that realism needs a push to yield up its deepest terrors and glories. As the movie shifts back and forth between Inman and Ada, they send formal letters to each other that are like notes in bottles bobbing in the sea. Do such notes consecrate the water in some way? In "Cold Mountain," they offer grace to the tormented landscapes that Inman tromps across. Minghella's sense of spectacle is both more vivid and more abrupt than in the past. At Petersburg, the Union Army plants explosives below the Confederate positions. When the dynamite is ignited, the men are tossed in the air and torn apart, including Inman, who lands with a thud and is buried in silence beneath mounds of dirt. This cataclysm is followed by the charge of the Union Army, thousands of men enshrouded in gray smoke hurling themselves against the Confederate bulwarks like the massed bodies of the damned in a Renaissance painting. The style might be called hallucinatory realism—high-flown yet filthy with the mire and blood of war.

After the battle, Inman escapes to a different kind of hell, the open country behind the lines, and the movie be-

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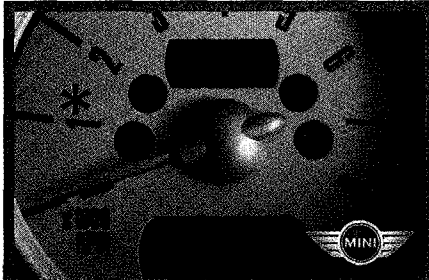
offers them women, and then turns them over to the Home Guard. As Inman and Ada, two chastely high-minded lovers, attempt to reach each other, predatory sex runs riot in hidden places.

Shaping these vignettes to bring out all their grotesque and boisterous life (and there isn't a dud among them), Minghella demonstrates a talent for violence that he's never suggested before. Even though I knew alarming things were coming, I was repeatedly startled by the power of his staging.

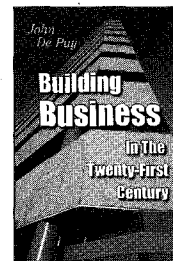
There's a near-sickening moment in which Inman and a group of other deserters, chained together like slaves, are shot, and Inman tries to drag the bodies of the others down a muddy hill. Yet Minghella is rooted in show business; he has given us the strongest kind of relief, filling out the vignettes with exceptional actors—including Eileen Atkins, as a witchy mountain woman who takes care of Inman when he's half dead, and Brendan Gleeson, as a fiddle player whose scratchy tunes signal a return to life mid-way through the movie.

comes a picaresque—an American Odyssey crossed, perhaps, with Frazier's or Minghella's memory of those samurai narratives in which warriors trying to get home are set upon by bands of marauders. In this case, the marauders are a vicious group of Southern freebooters—the Home Guard—searching for deserters and terrorizing their families. As Inman avoids these corn-liquored furies, he undergoes one physical and moral trial after another. He has an ambiguous encounter with a terrified group of slaves in a ruined cornfield. He runs into a fornicating minister (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and a backwoods scoundrel (Giovanni Ribisi), who lures Inman and the minister to his house,

While Inman struggles to get home, Ada's farm is revived by young Ruby (Renée Zellweger), an arrogant interloper with a strong back. Prune-faced and bossy, Zellweger stomps into the movie like a junior Mammy Yokum. At first she seems to be doing an easy comic turn—but then she grabs a rooster by the neck and breaks it with a snap of her wrist. Ruby teaches Ada to haul, plow, and plant, and to defend herself against the marauders, transforming her pale young mistress into a formidable woman. For a while, we seem to be watching the birth of a classless, all-female Southern society, but the romantic pull between the letter-writing lovers is too strong: the structure of the movie



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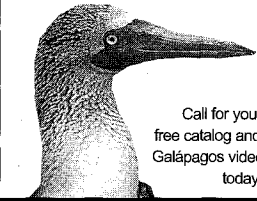
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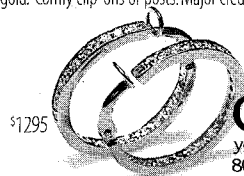
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demands that they reunite, like the halves of a drawbridge falling into place.

In recent years, that male beauty Jude Law has developed into a hardworking actor who is willing to take big chances. At the beginning of "Cold Mountain," Inman is a lazy, sensual boy; his consciousness develops slowly, and Law's eyes, as the movie goes on, grow more inquiring and expressive, as if he could see clearly only at the end. And Law suffers without making us suffer for him. He does what only a good actor who is also a movie star can do—he makes the actions of his character pointedly individual and, at the same time, impersonal enough to resonate as a common desire. Nicole Kidman was miscast in "The Human Stain"; here, with her flashing eyes and stalk-like body, she's on top of her game again as a minister's daughter devoted to duty but eager to break out. Although Kidman has been in movies for twenty years, she seems utterly fresh, as if she'd just been hatched somewhere deep in the most extravagant moviegoer's imagination.

"Cold Mountain" is strange in one way—the issue of slavery is barely mentioned, and black people are few and far between. One could point out that there weren't many slaves in the plantation-free mountains, but that isn't quite a sufficient answer. We never know, for instance, what the boys of Cold Mountain are running off to fight for, what Inman means when he says he was "lied to." The absence is a flaw, but it isn't a critical one. The backwash of war is as great a subject for art as it is a terrible experience to endure, and Minghella's style of larger-than-life realism is right for a historical moment in which the fantastic becomes everyday matter. "Cold Mountain" insists that you respond to it fully. You either shut it out or go all the way into it and come out feeling both shaken and wildly happy.

In "Something's Gotta Give," Nancy Meyers's contemporary comedy of sexual manners, Erica (Diane Keaton), a famous New York playwright and a woman who has been around the block a few times, is walking naked to the bathroom in her house in the Hamptons when a ladies' man named Harry (Jack Nicholson), who is a guest, stumbles upon her. How do these two veterans react to this unfortunate moment? Erica

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whoops and shrieks, while Harry throws up his arms, hurls himself against the wall, smashing picture frames, and shouts, "No! No!" as if to ward off an anthrax attack.

Who, I wonder, is this hysteria aimed at? Older members of the audience, who are presumably drawn to this kind of movie, would never react so foolishly. It's possible that Meyers has miscalculated. It's also possible that she's squarer than most people who go to the movies. I hasten to add that Erica is meant to be skittish (she wears turtle-necks, evidently an anti-sex fashion statement), and that Harry is an old goat who initially dates Erica's daughter (Amanda Peet). The movie is about the allegedly unlikely love affair between the goat and the turtle-neck. "Something's Gotta Give," I would guess, finds itself in a state of mortification mainly because Meyers propitiates, rather than challenges, what she takes to be the national habit of youth worship. For about half the movie, her embarrassment makes the affair horribly self-conscious and less romantic than lewd—"American Pie" for adults.

There are two good scenes: an evening snack in Erica's kitchen in which she and Harry candidly assess each other's character; and, later, a furious clash on a Manhattan street when Erica can't accept that Harry still likes young women, and he's baffled by her anguish. Despite much giggling and screaming, Keaton is as lik-

able as ever, and Nicholson is a great, glint-eyed mover. "Something's Gotta Give" is harmless, but it gave me a pain. Why make such a fuss over middle-aged bodies anyway? Grownups, including grownups in Hollywood movies from long ago, have an extraordinarily sexy way of talking one another into bed.

"Mona Lisa Smile" might be called a softer, American variant of "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie." Miss Katherine Watson (Julia Roberts), a bohemian and feminist art historian from California, shows up as an instructor at Wellesley in 1953, when the college is still a highly proper upper-class breeding ground for dutiful young wives. Stirring the place up, Katherine involves herself in the lives of her students—a bitch (Kirsten Dunst), a floozy (Maggie Gyllenhaal), and a superior brain who is determined to marry (Julia Stiles)—and has an affair with a sexy but untrustworthy Italian teacher (Dominic West). The fight against traditionalism has long been won, so the movie's indignation feels superfluous, but Mike Newell's direction is solid, the period décor and costumes are a sombre riot of chintz and pleated skirts, and the movie has an air of measured craft and intelligence. It's pleasant to discover that the reforming heroine, like Jean Brodie, carries along with her genuine spirit a degree of narcissism that makes her advice far from reliable. ♦

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TWICE CHRISTMAS

The black dog of Christmas jumps in the window, right on schedule, around eleven in the morning, or maybe sneaks in the front door you've just opened to admit the granddaughter who's here on time, after all—her cheek cold from outdoors—before the serious present-opening. It's still skulking around a little later when you make a tour of the room to pick up the ribbons and bright ripped-off wrappings and the cards (well, save the cards) and walk back to stuff them deep into the big kitchen wastebasket. Come on, this is Christmas, so brighten up, can't you? Listen to them, out there. Smile. Back before this one—on Christmas Day, 1931, let's say—the day began for my sister Nancy and me and our father with the stockings. Our narrow brownstone-house living room had a mantelpiece made of some dark oaky wood, with carved wreaths on the flankings, on either side of the fireplace: exactly the right thing, I noticed again, for this one day of the year. Then the tree, then the presents, then the lonely aunt and weird old cousins arriving to be cheered up on this special day. The goose, well carved by Father. The plum pudding, with bits of burnt matches floating in the brandy that at last takes light. The hard sauce. Now Nancy and I exchange a glance and get up and leave the others; upstairs we take our stuffed shopping bags and tiptoe back down and grab our coats. Goodbye, goodbye. Merry Christmas, everybody.

Out on the empty, sunlit street, there's a stripy blue taxi just coming by. We jump in and fly downtown. There's no Christmas tree at Rockefeller Plaza, because there's no Rockefeller Plaza yet—no Radio City at all. Maybe there's a tree at the far end of Madison Square, but it's not lit up or anything. Never mind. I look at Nancy—she's just turned fifteen—whose brown eyes are glittering, the way they do when she's excited. Yay, Christmas!

Back to our own tree, earlier that day. My father had kept the Victorian ornaments of his childhood—the fragile and now tarnished brownish-crimson or dark-green balls, the glass icicles, a bent-velvet

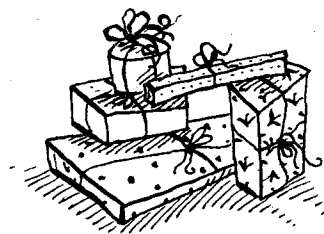
Santa with an ancient bit of rippled peppermint candy undetachably stuck inside his pack. Also the snap-on candleholders, which we fitted with fresh little candles and affixed carefully to the outer balsam branches, pinching the springy snaps until the thing stood upright on the swaying branch, with nothing above it to catch fire and bring on disaster and the Fire Department. Father had filled a white enamel kitchen pail with water and put it down, with the invariable short-handled dish mop beside it, next to the tree. Then we lit the candles, one by one. We started opening presents, but soon my father broke off to pick up the little mop and begin putting out the candles, one by one, as they burned low. Already, I thought—I *think* I thought—he looked grave at what was to come.

Downtown, a left onto Eighth Street and ring the bell. Christmas is starting all over again—my mother and stepfather's Christmas, in their little apartment looking down (from the back) onto Washington Mews. There are more presents here than uptown, and they're better wrapped. This tree has lights, not candles. Everything is new and young, even the Christmas-tree balls: I can't get over that. There's a Scottie named Daisy. A one-year-old brother, Joe, just up from his nap. The rubber plant named Hattie. My stepfather, Andy, mixing a Manhattan and offering one to Joe's slim young nurse, Eleanor McCluskey, who laughs and blushes at the idea. Happy Christmas, everyone. Shall we start the presents?

When it was over, after our second Christmas and second Christmas dinner, Nancy and I drove back uptown to 61 East Ninety-third Street in mid-evening—this was the plan: it was all

written into the divorce agreement—in another cab, with our different presents in other shopping bags propped on the seat beside us, and by the time we hit Park Avenue, with only the low ranks of green and red traffic lights up ahead for decoration, we'd fallen silent at the thought of Father again, and the quiet house waiting, and the put-aside stories about our Eighth Street Christmas, which we'd learned not to talk about, ever. This, in one form or another, is a particularly American sort of Christmas for perhaps millions of us—right up there with Clement C. Moore and "It's a Wonderful Life." Even then, well before I'd grown up, I swore to myself that such a thing would never be done to my own kids, when they came along. Only it was.

Is it this cut-rate Dickens tale that makes me glum in the middle of Christmas every year? No, not really. Is it the Christmas deodorant and electric-razor commercials, or the eighteen-hundred-dollar Christmas scarves, or the "God Rest Ye's" coming at us from Vienna and La Jolla and Baghdad and Nazareth, PA? No. Is it because I don't wake up that morning anymore and think, Christmas! No, but we're getting close: it's because I do still think that, at least for the first second or two. Just about the way I used to when I was eleven, except that back on that 1931 morning I still thought you could grab onto Christmas as it began to happen and more or less throw it to the floor. Was that the sound of an odd, early holiday train slithering along half empty toward Grand Central on the tracks under Park Avenue? Was there somebody walking by, across the street? There they went, and goodbye to this day, too, already a goner by the time Father rattled a box of matches and tossed it invitingly over to me, then fished for his cigarette lighter in the lower-right pocket of his vest as he stepped up to the tree. Shading the white triangle of flame behind his hand, he brought it up to the first candle, on its bending branch, and said, "Well, here we go. Christmas again." ♦





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